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FIFTEEN

MARCH



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15
STORIES

TALES

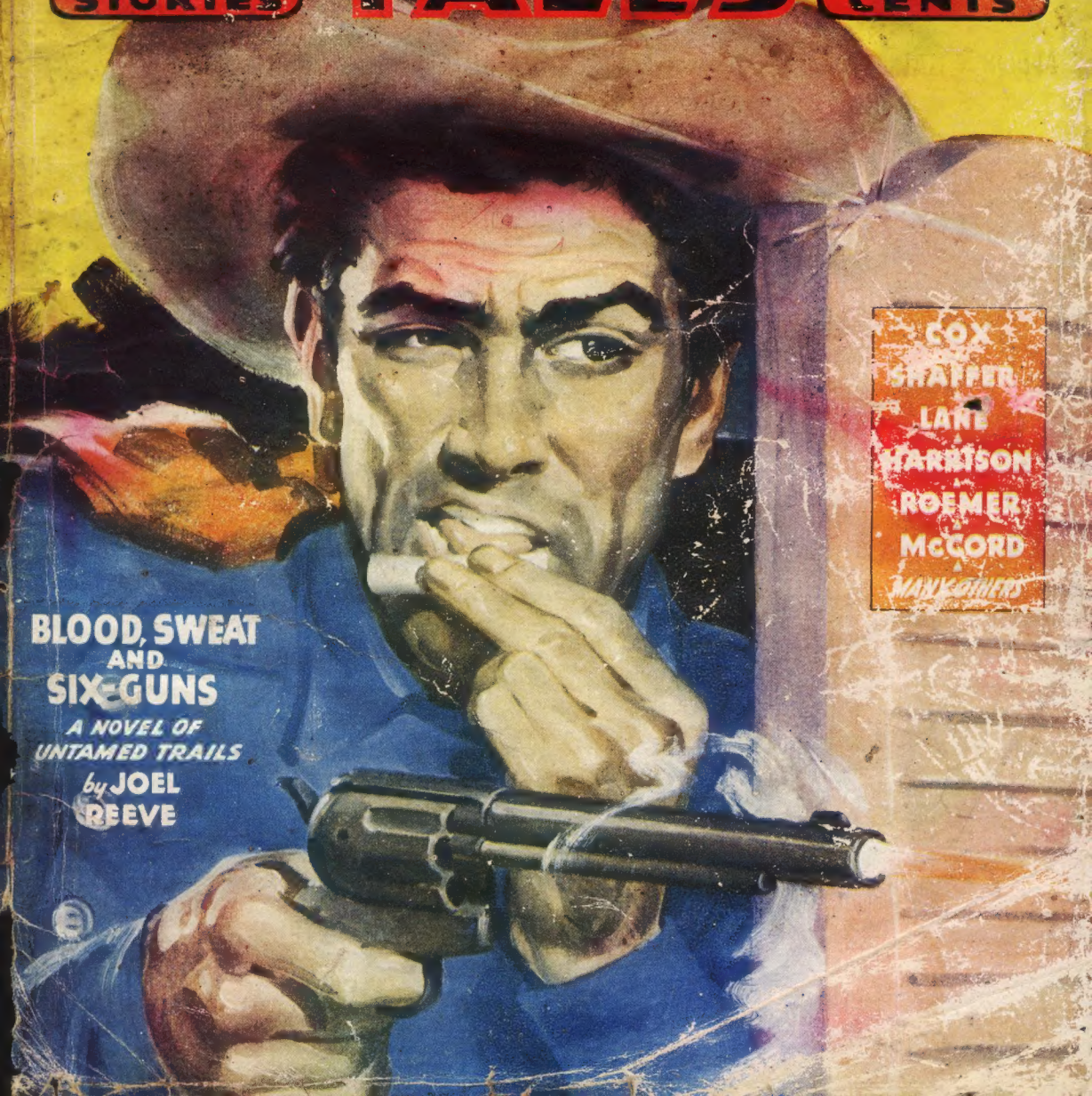
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CENTS

BLOOD, SWEAT
AND
SIX-GUNS

A NOVEL OF
UNTAMED TRAILS

by JOEL
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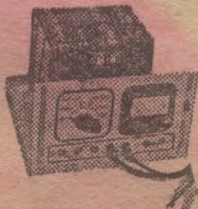
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15 STORIES 15 CENTS

VOLUME 5, No. 3



MARCH, 1944

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"You're too good a barber to die, Talcott. If you won't carry a gun—keep your razor sharp!"
2. **WESTWARD THE FREEDOM** *William R. Cox* 48
A giant from over the seas—a terror-on-wheels riding Westward—that was John Grant, until he found a girl who could shoot her way into a man's heart!

A Novelette of the Old West

3. **THE GUTLESS KID** *Theodore J. Roemer* 22
When you wear a dead man's guns for the first time to take up where a better man left off—you're buying into a solo game where you fill your hand—or die!

Short Stories

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Rand Clary had licked everything in his life, both lawmen and gunmen—why not the U. S. Army? But even Rand was surprised when he finally did it!
5. **OWLHOOT DEPUTY** *James Shaffer* 42
"Just because I didn't put a bullet in your brisket, ain't no sign I'm letting you take me in. Quit tryin' to reach that gun!"
6. **COMANCHE TRAIL** *M. Howard Lane* 60
"We'll play this hand as it should be played, Mr. Tinhorn. Deal from the top and —win or lose—I'll shoot to kill!"
7. **RENEGADE ROUNDUP** *Lance Kermit* 65
"I got a price on my head—even my dead carcass is worth money—" The doc remembered those words the instant before owlhoot guns blasted a dreadful answer!
8. **BLOOD ON THE CIMARRON** *David Crewe* 70
There was blood and flame on the Cimarron, and no one to do anything about it—until a Greenie from Missouri asked to be shown that he had something to die for!
9. **GILA RIVER SHOWDOWN** *Ray P. Shotwell* 82
There was one man too many in Gila Bend wearing Dusty Sharron's face—one of them had to go!
10. **HALF-PINT OF HELL** *Al Storm* 89
He had the image of an angel in his brain, a below-the-border song on his lips—and more hell in his gunslick heart than an Owlhoot town could tame!
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"There's no Sunday west of St. Louis—no God west of Fort Smith!"
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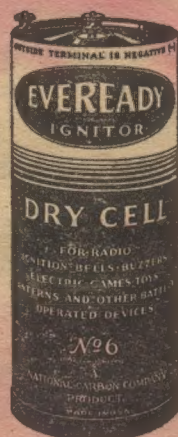
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● ON THE TRAIL ●



SINGLE-ACTION forty-fours! High riding boots and jangling spurs! A lone Texas Ranger on business bent, fire in his eye and determination in his heart, ready to fight or shoot at the bat of an eye.

A small, wiry, coatless man, with steel blue eyes that peered out over a handle-bar mustache. A heavy goatee that draped a square-cut jaw. A low vest that revealed a full expanse of shirt front. A heavy watch chain that stretched from one vest pocket to another.

That was Ranger Captain George W. Arrington, back in the days when the Southwest was really rough and tough and wild.

Texas Ranger records prove this Captain Arrington to have been quite a fellow—a fighting man of the purest type.

Arrington was born in Greencastle, Alabama, in 1844, was sixteen years old when the Civil War broke out. He immediately joined the Confederate forces, then drifted into that hard-bitten, hard-riding band known as Mosby's Guerrillas. And a lad had to have proved his fearlessness to ride with that wild bunch.

The war drew to a close. But young George Arrington hadn't seen enough fighting. He went to Mexico and there joined the army of the ill-fated Maximilian. The year 1867 found him mixed up in a Central American revolution.

After that he rode back into Texas and went to punching cows in Brown County, where the only law was that of the six-gun and the quick draw.

This state of affairs was remedied in 1874, however, when Major Jones, by order of the

Governor, organized the Frontier Battalion of Texas Rangers, an organization that was to do for the Panhandle country and Western Texas what earlier Rangers had done for the eastern section of the state.

Indians and outlaws to fight. Settlers to protect. Here was George Arrington's dish! He quit cowpunching and joined the Frontier Battalion. He was a law enforcement agent from that moment on.

Shortly after, in recognition of his service in various wars and his genius for commanding men, he was made a captain and assigned the tough job of bringing some measure of peace to the Panhandle of Texas—peace not only from marauding Indians, but from white outlaws as well.

Captain Arrington and his Ranger band set up permanent camp in Crosby County, near Catfish Creek, and immediately began scouting the country. Every Indian trail they found led straight into the desert to the West. How in the world, wondered Arrington, did those Indians, intent upon running off cattle and horses and gathering a few white scalps at the same time, get across the desert from New Mexico?

This was a weighty question, and a mystery. The nearest known water to the west was a full five days' ride, and not even Indians, innured as they were to hardship, could stand a five-day desert journey without water.

Then Arrington recalled the legend of the "lost lakes," bodies of brackish water said to lie more than two days' ride from any other water supply. Find the lost lakes and he had the Indian bands haunting the Panhandle.

(Continued on page 109)

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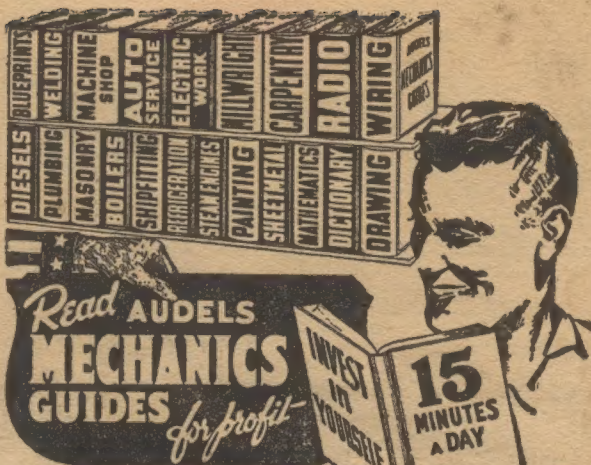
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BLOOD, SWEAT

He put the animal straight
at them, drawing the
razor.



CHAPTER ONE

Fast-Razor Man

PINEY TALCOTT held the razor firmly in his steady hand and grinned about the shop. Tom Mason stretched in the chair, half asleep. It was a happy Saturday

night in peaceful Saddleville. Then Slip Becker came in, glowering, barely nodded at Piney and went to sit upon the stool and watch the pool players.

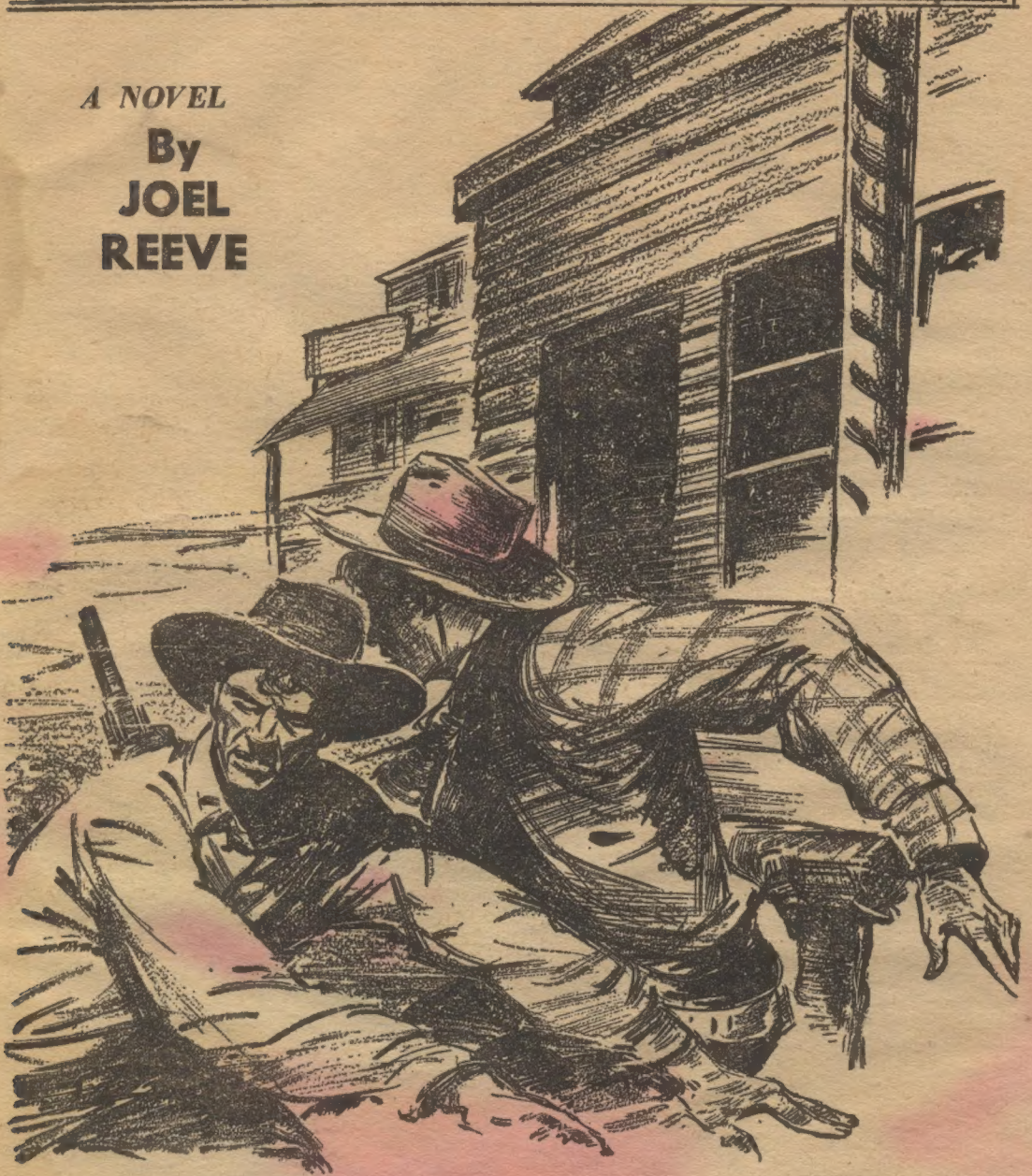
The balls clicked and the small fire glowed gently, for it was early spring. Piney ran the razor over Lawyer Mason's bony jaw and asked softly about Junior and the ailing Mrs. Mason.

He knew them all, every man, woman and child in Saddleville. Outside the patient horses at the rack hip-shifted and saddle leather

AND SIX-GUNS

A NOVEL

By
JOEL
REEVE



"You're too good a barber to die, Piney. If you won't carry a gun—keep your razor sharp!" But when they turned his shop into a Saturday night bloodbath Piney Talcott lathered the town with lead—and shaved it with a six-gun!

whispered and Piney thought of his own little spread, the Corner Z, where he was now running cattle. He had come a long ways since the slum days—a mighty long way. He could thank Saddleville for it all—he truly loved his town.

He spaped Tom Mason again, speculating about Slip Becker, wondering why the young Texan was so dour of late. He wrinkled his sharp nose and crinkled the corners of his kindly brown eyes, worrying a bit. Slip Becker worked for Lige Moran and both men were courting Alice Maylan and therein lay dynamite enough to disturb rudely the peace of Saddleville.

Out west, in the shadow of the mesa, Piney's own little spread lay next to the rolling acres of Lige Moran's Kaytee Ranch. Piney knew lots of things about Lige and John Strang, his partner, which were better left unsaid. Piney was for peace, first, last and always. But Alice Maylan was very sweet and Slip Becker was a fine young lad from Texas. . . .

Lawyer Mason came bolt upright in the chair and rubbed his chin. He drawled, "Cut me close, didn't you, Piney? What's on your mind?"

"Just thinkin' about my Herefords," grinned Piney. The laugh wrinkles made a network on his tanned skin and Mason smiled in response. Piney went on, "I always look forward to Sunday and Monday more'n the rest of the week."

Mason said, "You're a rancher in your heart, but you're a good barber, Piney. Never give up your razor. I know you don't carry a gun—so keep your razor sharp."

He shrugged into his coat, nodded grimly and walked out. The cold air swirled in behind him and Piney stood, his smile frozen, his thoughts whirling around the words of the lawyer.

Again the door opened, this time with a bang. Two tall, wide-shouldered men came in and stood looking about in the light of the lamps. The pool game immediately became less hilarious, a waiting customer hesitated in his progress towards the single chair.

Lige Moran moved forward gracefully and said, "Need a trim, Piney. And a shave." The customer unobtrusively resumed his perusal of an ancient Police Gazette, sacrificing his turn.

LIGE MORAN was a tall man, even sitting down for his barbering. His luxurious brown hair was wavy, his regular features marred only by the twisted bridge of his nose and the thinness of his lips. He did not glance at Slip Becker, but Piney could feel the tension as Slip sat upright on a high stool, ostensibly watching the pool players.

Slip was wearing his six-shooter. When

Lige sat in the chair he failed to remove his belt. Piney slowly picked up the shears and let his glance rest upon the bulky form of John Strang.

No one knew much about John in Saddleville. He was silent, almost morose. He was wide-shouldered and tapered to the tiniest feet in the county, and he always wore the fanciest of boots, being inordinately proud of his shapely underpinnings. He wore two guns, night and day. There were people who said he slept with those guns.

The country had been peaceful for some time—since the cattle wars of the 'seventies. Piney Talcott had come to Saddleville because it was comparatively settled and calm. In the late 'eighties Saddleville was settling down to prosperity and growth and the farmers already had their ploughs in the earth. When Lige and John had bought the Kaytee, all had been well enough. . . .

A figure passed the barber shop and through the windows Piney recognized the pleasing outlines of Alice Maylan, on her way home from the little dressmaking shop she operated down the street. Four times a day he saw her go by in this fashion, and each time he looked hard and earnestly without seeming to, hoping that no one would notice. She was a dark girl, but a smiling one, all curves and full of energy and a love of life which delighted the lean barber.

Slip Becker got down off the stool and started for the door. Alice passed from view and Slip hurried his step. Piney felt the tingle up and down his spine which always presaged trouble.

John Strang came from the wall, past a man who was trying to bank the eight-ball in the side pocket. He did not seem to move quickly, but he intercepted Slip without apparent effort. His heavy voice said, "Hi, Slip. Want you to do me an errand?"

The young Texan's eyes darkened. He was employed by Moran and Strang; it was Saturday evening. He could not in all conscience refuse an errand, as he was foreman and therefore a responsible employee. He said impatiently, "What is it, John?"

"Fork your cayuse and ride over to Lawyer Mason's ranch," said Strang. "Give his foreman this note." He handed a folded slip of paper to the Texan.

Slip hesitated one moment. From under the spread sheet, Lige Moran extended an arm strong as oak, thrusting Piney aside. The barber moved reluctantly, knowing that Lige's other hand was reaching for a gun.

Slip was unfolding the note. The pool players stopped their game; one of them dove for the rear exit. The others began melting away. Strang's voice said sharply, "You got no call to read my messages, Slip!"

Piney felt the pressure of Lige's strength, forcing him backwards. In a moment violence would break forth—it was in the voice of Strang, the strained pallidity of the fiery young Slip, in Lige's rock-like arm. Above all things Piney Talcott hated violence. . . .

Slip said, "There's no message here, John. You're just doin' the dirty work of your partner."

Slip was backing away, waving the fake message in one hand while he made a lightning draw with the other. Strang, faltering for a split second, was covered. He stood, hands dangling, face black with wrath and chagrin.

UNDER the sheet Lige's hands moved. Slip was saying bitterly, "I quit, John. I know I'm in the cut with you all. Lige and you together may be too much for me. I'm peaceable enough, John. But don't push me too far—"

The lad was retreating, ready to go out the back way and let the occasion slip by without incident. Piney held his breath, watching Lige's hand under the sheet. Slip wanted peace, too, then. Piney was suddenly overwhelmingly grateful to the Texan for not downing Strang in the shop, when he had the drop on him. In another second Slip would be gone and the thing ended. . . .

Lige shoved harder against Piney, throwing aside the sheet, leaping from the chair, his gun drawn. Slip was almost through the door. John said, "Get him, Lige!"

The gun went up. Piney held his breath, his face going white. Slip was defenseless, the open door between his gun hand and Lige.

Piney dove forward. The sharp points of the scissors flicked out in his iron barber's grip. They caught Lige's shirt, barely scraped the skin. The gun went off, very loudly, frightening Piney by its very noise. But he hung on, spoiling Lige's aim. Slip went through the door and ran for his horse as John drew and sent a shot echoing into the darkness.

Then Lige had turned and the thin lips were drawn back from white teeth like fangs. In the eyes of the handsome man was a leaping fire which Piney had never seen before. The latent passion was like an oven of annealing metal and Piney shrank back a step, panting, "I only wanted peace, Lige. It wouldn't be good to kill Slip. It would only start trouble all around."

"You skinny, long-nosed runt!" Lige grated. "Butting in on my business? Why, you damned barber!"

His fist came from nowhere and landed on Piney's cheek, knocking him into the arms of Strang.

"Send him back!" Lige ordered.

Strang slammed a long right onto Piney's nose and the bone crunched and the pain took away his breath. He tried to fight back, but tears blinded him and Lige was able to blacken both his eyes with another smash at the sore proboscis. He felt the sickness coming, but could not quite manage to faint. His arms flailed at empty air—the two men beat him scientifically. Time ran into years, it seemed, before they were gone, cursing, laughing a little, but with ferocity.

Then he was bent over the sink, washing himself, seeing his own blood, diluted by the water, pinkish, running down into the pail below. Not even red blood, he thought miserably. Not an ounce of fight in him. They had slapped him about as though he were a child. . . .

He knew now why his herd had not increased. He knew why the Herefords had not been productive. He was too close to the Kaytee. They had been friendly enough on the surface, but he had refused to sell to Lige and John Strang last spring, when they were expanding all over the countryside. The mere saving of Slip Becker was not enough to bring on this manhandling.

He raised his head and looked at his face in the mirror. His nose was a pulp, his eyes seemed slits in a puffy mess of flesh. He steadied himself with spread hands. The door to the street opened—he had not locked it, he remembered.

Behind him a soft voice said, "Slip asked me to thank you and tell you he would be in the hills near your ranch— Oh! Piney! They beat you!"

In the mirror he could see the reflection of her lively, lovely features. He saw the concern, the momentary revulsion at the ugly sight. Into his soul the iron bit, deeper than the pit of hell. He mumbled through jagged teeth, "It's all right, Alice. . . . Got to see a doctor. . . . I'll be all right. . . . Never was a purty man. . . ."

Then, to his final humiliation, he did faint, at the feet of the girl he worshipped.

WHEN he saw the girl again he was lying on the pallet in the rear of the barber shop and she was dipping warm water from a basin, her back turned, the lamp turned low. There was a blanket over the window and the girl moved quietly, turning towards him. He thought through the pain how beautiful she was and how calm and strong.

Then there was a knock at the rear door and she swerved, still carrying the wet cloth, listening against the panel. Someone whispered and she drew back the bolt. Lawyer Mason slipped in and locked the door behind him.

Alice said, "Have you heard anything?"

The bony lawyer was solemn. He was a slender man, past middle age, a clever man but without violence, and Piney had always liked him. He said, "Yes. Lige is striking the entire countryside. He bought out the Bar X, the Ace and the little H-E outfit. Now he is cleaning out the nesters along the river."

The girl said, "He will claim the nesters rustled his cattle—why is he doing it, Mr. Mason? Why must Lige begin a war?"

Lawyer Tom Mason said slowly, "Some men lust for power. It is not within them to live and let live. My little place—Piney's tiny ranch, the nesters—add them up and they mean one big outfit, using grass and water. He'll be after us next, Piney and me."

Piney pushed at the edges of the pallet. He could sit up, he found, without further pain. A momentary dizziness came and went—he was wiry from riding Sundays and Mondays on the ranch and working in the shop the remainder of the week. He said, "Have they run off my cattle? The sheriff—"

Mason said kindly, "I don't know how far they have gone, Piney. But the sheriff is north and won't be back. You know Lige and John elected him."

Alice came with the hot cloth and bathed the edges of splints newly adjusted. Piney breathed through his mouth and knew the doctor had come and gone. His nose was as large as a balloon. He said, "Thank you, Alice—has Slip turned up?"

She frowned worriedly, "He's watching your outfit. He must have warned your men by now."

Piney got to his feet, tried a step or two. He muttered, "They beat the tar outa me, didn't they?" He found himself steady enough. He pulled at the buckle of his belt and reached for the sombrero on a peg behind the door. Absently he knotted a reboso around his neck and slipped on the vest which was the working garment of the country. He said, "I'm a peaceable barber. I'm no fighter. You're no fighter, either, Mr. Mason. You warned me, I remember."

Mason said, "What are you going to do, Piney?"

Piney looked at the girl. He said, "It's 'most Sunday by now. My men'll expect me. Got to ride out to the ranch."

"If Lige's killers are riding they'll get you easy! You don't even own a gun!"

"Couldn't shoot it if I did," nodded Piney. His face was a grotesque mask of bruises and bandages. "But I never aimed to barber all my life; I wanted to ranch. Me and cow brutes—we get along. If people'd let me alone, I'd a done all right, so if I got to get killed, it'll be as a rancher, not a barber."

There was a little silence in the shop.

PINEY walked to the back door. The outside was bright with moonlight and Alice followed him to the little barn where he stabled his fine sorrel cow pony, Jenkins. He saddled up, trying not to move his head too quickly, stifling the pain.

Alice said in a low voice, "Slip will be on your side. When he finds they beat you, he'll be wild. He knows you saved him to-night. Slip can fight if he wants to."

Piney mounted and looked down at her. He said, "I wouldn't want Slip to fight my battles. I got to think, Miss Alice. I'm cornered, I reckon. I can think better at the ranch, with the boys around me."

"You're a good man, Piney," she whispered, her white face staring up at him. "You stand for the best in Saddleville."

He stammered, "Thanks, Miss Alice. I'll do what I can. I'll—thanks!" He clapped heels to the pony and rode northwest towards the ranch.

He was at ease in the saddle, almost as though he had been born to it, like Slip Becker or Lige Moran. But it had taken years for him to attain that seat in the leather. Things had never come easy to him, not since his father had died in Brooklyn, leaving him to grow as a street urchin, a newsboy, a boot-black and finally a runaway from a stepmother who abused him. He had learned to barber from a kindly Italian in Baltimore. . . .

At eighteen he had felt the lure of the west. Like thousands of other homeless folk, he had drifted, barbering his way, saving a little when he could, seeking to find security. Ranching had intrigued him, and in Saddleville he had found his place, he thought. He had bought the Corner Z, brought in a few Herefords with his last money and seemed about ready to make a start.

Meantime, the habit of barbering had proven stronger than he imagined. The smells and sounds of the shop, the pool table's fun and camaraderie—and the steady income which bought feed for the horses and equipment for the small but sturdy house he had improved so well—kept him on the job five days per week. But his heart was in the ranch.

He rode now through the cottonwoods, then over the hill and along the trail to the creek. He crossed the water and knew that the two miles ahead were fraught with the danger of Lige Moran's wrath and avidity. Still he rode, head high, never deviating from his straight path.

Slip Becker should be somewhere about. Alice had said that he was keeping an eye on things. Undoubtedly Slip had warned Jake and Louie and Pico, the three men who took care of the Corner Z. Jake and Louie were oldtimers, and Pico was a young Mexican lad.

None of them could be called fighting men—they were cowhands, working men. But there were guns at the ranch and any man would defend himself, Piney knew. Even Piney had tried feebly to fight back against the fists of Lige and John Strang.

Again the wave of humiliation swept over him, remembering how Alice had come to his aid—but she was Slip Becker's girl, Piney knew now.

Lige was evidently out of the running, and Piney shrewdly figured that as the reason for the abrupt action of the Kaytee against the small ranches. Lige must have got his walking papers and immediately thrown off all restraint. The attack upon Slip was a logical development.

HE RODE down the draw and Jenkins clattered a hoof upon metal, sidestepping immediately, almost unseating his rider. Piney reined in, dropped to earth. The moonlight shone on a huddled figure, propped against a boulder. Piney bent and picked up the revolver which Jenkins had kicked.

A husky voice said, "Musta been asleep. . . that you, Piney? Knew you had t' come this way."

Piney said, "Slip! They got you!"

"Plenty, they got me," said Slip drily. "They got you, too. They got Jake and Louie. It was a fight and I chipped in, but Strang was layin' for me with a rifle—"

Piney said, "The—the ranch?"

"Sorry," mumbled Slip. "It's still smokin', I reckon—they run off your cattle. . . Pico got away, I think. . ."

Piney stood silent for a moment, looking up at the moon. The light fell across his grotesque features, bathing him in a white glow. His adam's apple worked convulsively, once, twice. A tear ran down his bruised cheek.

Then he was bending over Slip and his voice was calm. He said, "They own the whole range, now. Tom Mason is quitting. They'll be back lookin' for us, Slip. Town won't be safe."

Slip said, "I got it in the chest. I can't live long. You get up in the hills beyond the mesa. . . ."

Piney said, "Sure. That's a good idea. C'mon."

He picked up the Texan, not without effort, and supported him to where Jenkins stood waiting. He listened to Slip curse, but got him in the saddle somehow. He turned the horse towards town and started walking. It was not easy to walk in the boots, and Slip kept leaning first one way, then the other, and finally began to rave incoherently, maundering about Alice, about his lost job, cursing Lige Moran and John Strang.

The sun was mounting the horizon when

they stumbled into town. Piney's feet were swollen inside the boots, but Slip Becker was still alive. The pallet behind the barber shop groaned beneath the tossing of the Texan, and Piney went after Alice and the doctor. Then he carefully unsaddled and stabled Jenkins.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood Bath

WEEKS can fly by like swallows winging south, Piney thought. It was late summer, now. Saddleville lay in the hot sun and panted—waiting, fretful, changed.

Piney stood in the door of his shop. It was Saturday and the sheriff had just left. Down the street Alice Maylan paused in her sewing and wiped perspiration from her brow. Lawyer Tom Mason crossed the street to his office, glancing up and down, hesitating as he saw Piney, then going inside without speaking.

There was a cloud of dust at the northwestern end of Main Street. Two riders loped along, sweaty and dusty. They clattered down the street and no one ventured forth to greet them. They drew up in front of Piney's shop and hitched their horses to the rail.

Without a word Piney went inside and got towels. There was soap and water and tubs in the back—an innovation providing baths for the riders before they got trimmed and shaven for the night's doings. There was a new saloon across the street now, with a few women and several tinhorn gamblers. In a small way, Saturday was a big night in Saddleville these days—exclusively maintained for the huge Kaytee Ranch and its friends and business acquaintances.

Lige and John Strang entered the shop. Piney said, "Your baths are ready, gents."

"Sounds like a valey, like that Britisher told us about, don't he, John?" said Lige.

"Sounds like a damn barber," said Strang. There was no humor in the dour man. His eyes were like gimlets, always boring into Piney. Ever since the night of the beating John had been suspicious and Piney had to be very careful. . . .

When he had quietly reopened his shop after the funerals of Jake and Louie, going about his business as usual, people had at first stared, then snickered, then accepted him as a man who had been beaten and had bowed to fate. It had been pretty lonely in those months. But it had been worse to see Saddleville change.

Lige said casually, "Saw the sheriff just now. Said everything was quiet in town. Said you wouldn't talk. That's smart, Piney."

Strang said, "Piney wants to stay alive. Some men'll do anything to stay alive."

Piney shrugged, smiling weakly. He still bore scars which would never disappear. His nose was, strangely enough, twisted in the same way Lige's was skewered. He wondered idly who had broken Lige's nose—then stopped, for fear some emotion would show on his face.

Lige said, "Shoot you a game of pool for a dollar, John." Lige was always cheerful these days.

He was calling on Alice again, since Slip's disappearance.

Slip had recovered—at least enough to remove to the hills beyond the mesa. The doctor had kept his mouth shut, as doctors do, and Alice had helped packed him out to the hidden cabin in a buckboard. Of course Alice had not dared stay, but Slip was tough. He was in fine fettle now. Piney handed down the cues to the two cattle barons and went back to the doorway.

The balls began to click and Lige kept up a steady stream of conversation, kidding John, openly confident, daring break shots which gave his opponent every opportunity to run the table, then capitalizing on Strang's misses. But in the end, John won by a ball and was paid off.

Then they went into the back and Piney could hear Lige railing at his luck and the splashing of water in the big tubs as the two bathed. In a moment he would trim Lige's hair, then shave both of them. He would stand over them with the razor in his hand, the sharp edge at the jugular. . . .

And one would be watching while the other submitted to his ministrations. Lige and John were smart. He was the only barber in town and they needed him—but even after these months they did not wholly trust him.

Especially Strang. The big man was suspicious of everyone and everything. He was hardbitten, though not as brilliant as his partner. He was the bulwark upon which the ever-increasing Kaytee holdings were built.

And the Kaytee was growing by leaps and bounds. Piney's own Herefords were helping to improve the stock and the new calves would be good ones. The grass was good and there was plenty of it. Round-up would find the herd numbering thousands. There was no one to stop its increase.

The sheriff had believed what he wanted to believe—that the nesters were rustlers and needed running out, that Piney had been the victim of a hit and run band of thieves; that Lawyer Mason had sold out of his own free will, that Lige and John, his patrons, were running things for the best. A cut on the gambling proceeds of the new saloon, the Key-hole, had much more than made the sheriff happy.

PINEY stropped his razor. He had several of the blades, Sheffield and Toledo, and he was very careful and proud of them. He tested this one on a hair and found it satisfactory. He held out his hand—it was steady. Barbering developed phenomenal hands, of course. Slip had spoken of that often, in the visits Piney had with him in the hills, through the long weeks of waiting.

He heard John Strang say, "You can laugh it off, but we're losin' cattle."

Lige's reply was lost in the splashing, but Strang said stubbornly, "There could be rustlers in the hills. I'm sendin' some boys out Monday to look around. Now that we're big, we're fair game."

Lige said plainly, "We can afford to lose a few head. But you're right—a hangin' or two will warn others."

Piney folded the razor and slipped it into its case. He stepped out to the street and glanced down towards Alice's tiny shop. After a moment she came out and looked his way and he made a motion with his left hand. She touched her hair with the fingers of her right hand and turned back into the shop.

Piney went past the pool table and to the back window. He waited, timing the bathers behind the thick partition he had put in to close off the baths. Alice came in very quietly, along the back way, concealed by a fence Piney also had caused to be erected to shut in the yards behind the row of stores.

He bent close to her and whispered, "Monday. Tell Pico to run out now and have Slip move the cattle and lie low."

She said, "He's scarcely begun. They caught on awful quick."

"They keep close track, now they're big," said Piney regretfully. "Slip'll have to drive those he has."

She nodded, smiling at Piney. "You're very smart," she whispered. "Don't let them harm you."

Then she was gone. Piney wandered back to his chair and was waiting when Lige came out and sat down. John Strang wore his gun and waited on a straight chair, tilted back, his hat over his eyes, disdaining to read the papers. Piney patiently cut Lige's hair, then shaved him with consummate speed and skill. The rancher got up and said, "You're a swell barber, Piney. I got to give you credit."

Strang lowered himself into the chair and said harshly, "And you should stick to it. Never forget that."

Piney dropped Lige's money into the drawer and said humbly, "I learned a lesson once. That was enough."

He looked straight down into the cruel eyes of John Strang and began shaving him. Lige whistled, watching, a crooked smile on his lips.

OUT on the street a dog barked. Then there was the clatter of hoofs and a shout. Lige wheeled to stare through the window. A gambler was having trouble with his mount. Lawyer Tom Mason's small boy, Junior, had run off the sidewalk directly into the path of the bolting animal. Lige swore and reached for his gun.

Piney went past Lige, folding his razor, thrusting it into his pocket. He was wearing walking boots, with ample heels. He ran flat-footed, but with great speed. He bent and snatched, never losing a stride. He caught Junior's clothing in his grasp and was on his way as the horse reared and struck with forefeet, wildly.

One hoof smashed directly at Piney's head. He saw the shadow, ducked, and tossed the child for the safety of the boardwalk. Junior landed on his feet, sat down and began to squawl. His father came running, pale as a ghost.

Piney ducked, whirled and grabbed. He caught the bridle of the animal, clung to it, although lifted off his feet. He spoke to the horse soothingly, bringing its head down, holding onto one ear, forcing the animal to his will. The gambler reeled in his saddle and fell off, drunk, into the street.

Piney hitched the quieted animal to the

rail next to the Kaytee horses and went into the shop where Lige stared open-mouthed and John Strang sat upright in the chair, his sharp eyes burning. Lige said, "That was pretty fast work, Piney."

Strang said harshly, "Six months ago he'd never had tried that."

Lige said, "That lesson he learned must've put him in better shape."

Piney wiped his hands on a damp towel, plunged his hot face into its coolness. His voice was weak and calm. "Always liked Junior. I'm ready to shave you now, John."

Strang stretched slowly in the chair. Lige fidgeted, his eyes going out to where lawyer Mason was smacking his child and sending him home, then back to Piney's bowed shoulders. The scrape of the razor was the only sound.

At last the job was finished. Strang threw a coin to Piney and picked up his hat. Lige turned at the door and said, "I dunno, Piney. Seems to me you've got quite active. You wouldn't have any ideas, would you? If you want satisfaction, I could take off these guns—seein' you don't tote shootin' irons."

Piney said quietly, "I told you I learned a lesson."

John Strang said viciously, "You'd have been dead long ago if I had my way, you

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snivelin' little character. I don't trust you, understand? And if I ever catch you one step off the reservation—you'll get it and quick!"

Piney said, "I've always known that, John."

They went out, Strang across to the Keyhole, Lige down to Alice's shop. Piney automatically cleaned the floor and went in back to straighten up. The lesser men of Kaytee would be in for their big night, and he would be busy until midnight.

He felt uneasy. He knew he had given himself partially away to his enemies. There had been no time to think—Lige might have shot the horse and still been unable to prevent the animal's falling upon Junior.

He went back outside and Lawyer Tom Mason was there, his bony features pale. Mason said, "All right, Piney. You can count me in."

Piney said mildly, "Not because I saved the boy. There's no use your coming in unless your mind is made up."

Mason said, "I was thinking of Mary and the kid. Now I can see that because of them I must throw in with you."

Piney said, "We just want you to be ready to defend us when something breaks. And to look up past records. And to be ready to say I was robbed and you were forced to sell."

"I know what to do," said Mason impatiently. "If we get into court I can handle it. But how are we to live long enough to get them into court?"

Piney said slowly, "We aim to stir them up, hurt them plenty when they fight us—beat their ears down and then take them to law!"

Mason said weakly, "The Kaytee? That big outfit? Just you and Slip and that Mexican boy?"

Piney said, "It'll take some time. Is Junior all right?"

Mason shook his head. "Junior's all right—but his father is shaky right now!"

PICO was a smooth-faced lad in his teens, slant-eyed, silent. He had been very fond of Jake and Louie, who had taught him so much about ranching. . . .

It was midnight and Pico was closing up the shop, turning out the lights, putting up the blinds against the drunks who loved to hear the crashing of glass. Piney said quietly, "Get the horses around back. I'll do a scout."

Piney went out on Main Street and Saddleville was a red riot of bawdy sounds. The Keyhole was going full blast. At the bar he had a drink, alone, his eyes going over the crowded saloon. Lige and John were sitting in the big poker game, others of the big Kaytee outfit were drinking, dancing with the raucous women, bucking the monte and faro games. Piney counted noses. He knew to the

man the gunslinging strength of the Kaytee.

He finished his drink and went outside. It was a clear, cool night and he met Alice near her own small house and, in the shadows, she said, "You shouldn't go out tonight. They are getting on to things."

Piney said, "The time has got to come. In the open."

"We're not strong enough," she said. "I talked with Lige about the Kaytee. Without bragging, he told me of its strength. There are too few of us."

Piney said, "Lawyer Mason is in."

She spread her strong white hands. "This is a fighting matter. The courts will never settle this."

They could hear the hurdy-gurdy, the curses of the gamblers, the shrill laughter of the light women. Piney said, "It's for the town as much as anything. I could stand the beating, the loss of the ranch. I thought the ranch was everything in the world. But it was my shop, the kindness of our people, the gossip of the farmers, the little ranchers. It was home—and now it's not home any more."

She breathed, "I know. You're a builder, Piney. You want the land to belong to all, each according to his industry. You're right, as always, Piney."

He said, "You got a message for Slip? Pico says he won't slope with the herd 'til tomorrow."

"Tell him to be careful—and to shoot straight," she said helplessly. "I know there will be shooting." She pressed his hand a moment, then walked away. Someone was coming, and Piney kept in the shadows until the homecomer passed by. Then he went swiftly to the passageway between his shop and the new fence and there were Pico and Jenkins and a sturdy little black pony.

They mounted wordlessly and rode out of town, following the remembered route. They came to the draw and rode out on the far end. It was a bit out of their way and they were in haste, yet by common consent they always rode past the blackened ruin of the Corner Z. It put iron into their spirits to see it lying there, awaiting rebirth.

They ascended the mesa, then turned and rode down an arroyo. They made a sharp turn and paused. Piney whistled and a man arose from behind a rock, trailing a rifle.

Piney said, "Hi, Slip. You ought to be gone. Strang's after us."

Slip Becker came forward. In the dim light he seemed older, stooped; a menacing figure. He said, "They got a herd slung over in Lost Canyon. Only two men watchin' it. I could only handle sixty, seventy critters myself. The three of us could run that herd and be to hell and gone before the weekend

carouse is over. . . . You always take Sunday and Monday off, Piney. They wouldn't know."

"They might suspect," said Piney. He thought of the incident of the runaway horse and Junior Mason, of John Strang's glittering, suspicious eyes.

Slip said sharply, "Otie Heath and Mack Summer are the two watching this herd. They were both in on the burnin' of the Corner Z."

Pico hissed between his teeth, like a snake. Piney slowly nodded his head.

He reached into the saddle bags on Jenkins' haunches. He withdrew two well-oiled, shiny Colts 44 revolvers. He found the worn cartridge belt Pico had supplied him. The two watched as he buckled on the guns. Then Slip nodded and said, "I threw the cows I swiped over in the valley beyond Lost Canyon. We can pick them up whenever the Kaytee wants to palaver. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

Six-gun Shave

SLIP led. He had been lurking in the hills all through the months, so that now he knew every foot of land, every tree, every mesquite thicket, every chaparral. They dismounted as they came to the canyon and Slip sent Pico up along the ridge with a rifle.

Piney said, "We got to give them a show."

"Like they gave Jake and Louie?" snarled Slip. The bitterness of waiting, the pain of his old wound had made Slip a different man, Piney thought, not for the first time. He lived only for revenge, now. He scarcely asked for Alice any more. He just wanted to know about Lige and John. He only wanted to destroy them.

Piney said quietly, "I'm giving them a chance."

"If they get away we're ruined," warned Slip.

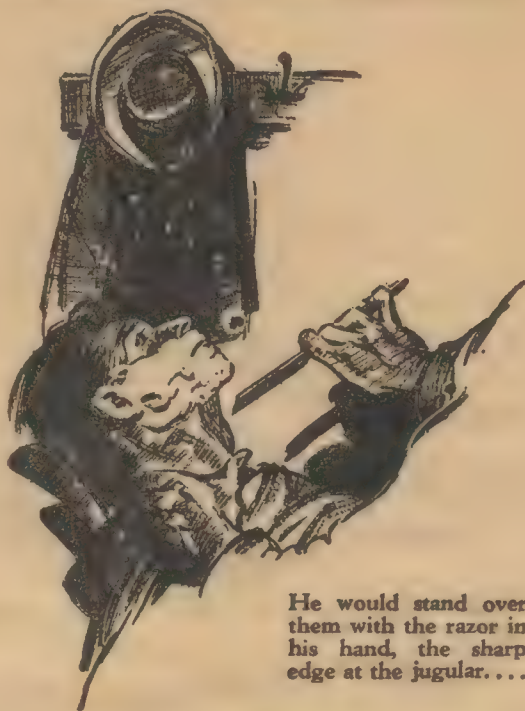
Piney did not answer. He rode Jenkins down into the canyon. He could see the cattle, quiet in the night. One of the herders was sleeping in his blankets. That was Otie Heath, because tall, lank Mack Summer was astride a pony, humming to the cattle, cowboy fashion.

Piney said sharply, "Mack! Reach for your gun! It's Piney Talcott!"

The lank man straightened, said, "G'wan, you yella barber. Run away!"

The blankets stirred. Heath, a real gunman, came awake baring his hogleg, looking for a target. Piney, his attention upon Summer, backed off a step and said, "Fill your hand, Mack! We mean business."

Slip was still on his horse, Piney was afoot. Heath leveled his gun at Piney. Slip drew



He would stand over them with the razor in his hand, the sharp edge at the jugular. . . .

like lightning and threw down on Heath. From above, a rifle cracked.

Mack Summer pitched forward, rolled over the neck of the his horse and hit the ground. Otie Heath died in his blankets, his gun unfired. Slip thrust the smoking revolver back into his belt and cried, "The cattle! Get 'em movin'!"

Piney ran for his horse. He had not worked it right, he thought despondently. He recognized his mistake—he hadn't allowed for Otie's waking up and taking instant action. It was all on account of his not being used to gunfights. There was, he found, a technique which had to be learned. He had meant to fight it out with Mack—and he had nearly been killed. He was grateful to Slip and to Pico—but now he had to ride.

The cattle, disturbed by the shots, were milling. Pico came down with his black and headed them westward. Slip was riding behind, crying out, waving his quirt. Piney took the left flank and began working them, using their terror as a spur, chasing them over to the valley where the others waited. It would make five hundred head, he reckoned, a neat blow at the Kaytee, although not a damaging loss to them. Slip had maybe stolen five hundred previously, in small bands, which he had sold to the obliging Mexicans for over-the-river resale. That number was still less than the cattle taken at the burning of the Corner Z!

He had cause to be elated, yet he was not. He did not, in his simple soul, enjoy taking

justice into his own hands, even when the case was as clear as this one. Even when the cows taken were his own. He rode hard and long with the faithful Pico, but still uneasy.

LIGE MORGAN and his men were riding furiously on the trail of the stolen cattle, but John Strang remained behind. He saw to the burial of Heath and Summer, he studied the sign. Long ago, in Indian country, John Strang had learned how to read sign very well indeed. Many things he had learned from the fierce Comanches. . .

He mounted the ridge to the north of Lost Canyon and found the place where Pico had fired his rifle shot. He came down and read the evidence that there had been three men in the attack. He tilted his hat back upon his head and brooded, his eyes slitting, rage rising within him. Heath and Summer had been good gun-slingers, valuable men.

He leaned down to pick up a bit of cloth fast in a bush. He held it in his fingers, turning it over and over. He frowned, shaking his head. Anyone could be wearing blue jeans in this country. The jagged piece he held was worthless as evidence unless he found the pants from which it had been torn. He again examined all the tracks of the men who had marauded his herd.

He stopped dead at a certain spot. A heel mark was very plain in the soft earth. He got down on his hands and knees, putting his face close to the imprint.

He got up, pale with passion. He caught up his horse, mounted and spurred viciously back to the Kaytee. He drank a pint of whiskey, nursing his knowledge of that flat, wide heelmark, remembering how Piney Talcott had run so swiftly in his flat boots to save Junior Mason. He pondered the accurate gunfire, knowing that Piney never wore weapons and was supposedly without knowledge of their use.

When Lige came back he recited his belief, ending, "If there'd been razor work, we could be sure. I'm for taking care of that damned barber right now."

Lige said slowly, "We can take a look for those pants. If we find 'em—the sheriff can do the job. We're respectable now. We're gettin' rich."

"We won't be rich long if it keeps happenin' like this," said Strang darkly. "The barber, his Mex kid—and someone else. Now, I wonder who the third rat can be?"

Lige said, "It don't matter. I'll send a man after the sheriff—it's Wednesday and Piney'll be in the shop."

Strang went out to where the men lounged about, hunkered down on their heels, discussing the cattle raid and the death of their

friends. He said, "Okie, Texas Joe—Rannie. Saddle up. Pick six others. We're goin' to town."

He had named the three closest to Heath and Summer. He knew his tough outfit to the core. He saw to his guns and turned to Lige. His partner said, "Get the evidence first. We got to have the town on our side, this time."

Strang swallowed a hot retort. The rage within him was growing to a white heat. The urge to kill was on him, a virulent thing, driving him. He caught up his own horse, trying to still his burning desire. He was a man accustomed to rule, unwilling to accept affront. The thought of the lean barber stealing his cows, killing his men was choking him.

PINEY fingered the hole in his blue jeans. He remembered backing off from Mack Summer, stepping momentarily against the mesquite's jagged points. He shook his head, carrying the trousers, walking out back of the shop.

Pico said, "We sew them up?"

"No," said Piney. "We get rid of them."

Pico said, "Si, senior," and took the pants. Piney went back into the shop and began shaving Lawyer Mason. But Pico was a Mexican and thrifty. He carried the pants down to the adobe hut where he lived alone and proceeded to mend them with care. They fit him very well indeed and he grinned, donning them, anxious to show his boss that he had saved the price of a new pair.

Tom Mason was retying his necktie when Pico came beaming into the shop. Lige Moran and John Strang clattered up and dismounted. Although it was mid-week, there were a dozen Kaytee riders along the street. Mason turned and stared at Piney, paling.

Piney said, "Go slowly. This may be a bluff."

The sheriff was a blustering big man. He stayed on the other side of the street while Lige and John came into the shop. Pico was brushing the pool table, his slant eyes blank, his back turned to the action.

Piney said, "What do you gents want to-day?" His voice and hands, he found, were very steady.

Lige's eyes fell at once upon the patched jeans. He took a great stride, wheeled Pico about in heavy grasp, jerked out the bit of blue stuff and thrust it at the patch. Allowing for trimming, the fit was correct. Lige's fist slammed into the boy's face, knocking him out through the barber shop door. He yelled, "Sheriff! Here's your damned murderer."

Piney licked at dry lips. He said mildly, "Now wait, Lige. What's this all about?"

John Strang's hand fastened on Piney's shirtfront. The big man shook Piney back

and forth, slowly, his sharp eyes probing. He said, "Maybe you know damn well. Maybe you were there, too. Three men killed Mack and Otie, and rustled Kaytee cattle. Maybe you want to deny you were there?"

Piney said, "I sure wouldn't admit it!"

The sheriff had handcuffs on Pico. There was a bloody streak on the lad's face where Lige had struck, but he had not changed expression and there was no fear in him. Lige said, "You're wearing those flat heels, Piney. Nobody else around here wears them."

The sheriff drew forth another pair of handcuffs. Strang hurled Piney against the doorjamb. He bounced, turning. He heard Lige bellow, "I demand the arrest of this damn barber!"

Slip was far away in the hills. Lawyer Mason was no bulwark of defense. Piney's mind raced. He staggered, purposefully. Lige's big black horse was not securely tied to the rail. Piney's quick, strong hand snapped loose the reins.

He made one jump and landed in the saddle. Bending low, he kicked at the amazed horse's ribs. He heard the singing of the first bullet, then he had the black under control and came around. He put the animal straight at them, into the teeth of their drawn guns. He stayed low, on the neck of the animal and drew out the razor he had automatically folded into his pocket when the ruckus started.

The big sheriff made a leap to grab the bridle, while Lige and John Strang, caught unawares, were scrambling for safety. Pico came around, slipping his thin wrists from the awkward, ancient handcuffs. In one jump he was up behind Piney.

THE razor licked out. The sheriff's arm showed red, he fell away, howling more in fright than in pain at the sight of the opened razor. The black horse made two jumps and turned a corner. Piney immediately slid down from its back and with a slap, sent it kiting for home.

Pico, rubbing his wrists, said, "We run now, eh?"

Piney was already racing for the rear of his shop. The stable door was open and in a trice they had saddles on Jenkins and the pony. They could hear the yelling and excitement outdoors as the Kaytee formed a posse for pursuit. Piney reached in the bag and got his guns. He pulled the belt buckle tight and said, "You better ride and get Slip. He'll want in on this. We're in the open, now."

Pico said, "I no stay with you?"

"Take the short cut, evade the draw and give the signal from the mesa top. Slip'll be around," said Piney. "I'm not running from Saddleville. You take Jenkins along so they'll

think I've gone even when they find the black is riderless."

Pico said reluctantly, "You plenty smart, senor. But I no like to leave you."

Piney said, "Get Slip. It's important, Pico."

The Mexican youth shrugged and mounted. Dusk was not far away and the lad could ride like a ghost, Piney knew. The two horses disappeared past the fence which Piney had erected for just such an emergency.

Piney drew a deep breath and examined his guns. The months of practise would have to pay off now, he thought. If Slip could get in, striking with the vantage of surprise, there might even be a chance. . . .

But if he had submitted to arrest by the sheriff, with all those Kaytee riders in town, there would have been a lynching and he knew it well. The tinhorns and hangers-on of the Kaytee and the Keystone bar would have seen to that, while Lige and John remained in the background. The Kaytee, he realized, meant to do things legally—up to a certain point. The sheriff was a fine tool in their hands.

He walked cautiously along the fence towards the shop where Alice would be waiting for some word. He had to be very careful not to involve her. Lige would not be able to save her from John Strang's vitriolic rage if she were suspected of complicity in the war Piney had started.

On Main Street the gamblers were yiping and the Kaytee men left to keep the pot boiling were swearing that Piney and Pico would dance from the end of ropes that night. Piney wished that the sun would go completely to rest. He needed time to wait for Slip, to make plans against this sudden and unfortunate turn of events.

He scratched at the back door of Alice's shop. There was no reply. He tried again.

The door opened. One of the Kaytee men was holding Alice's mouth, throttling her attempt to warn Piney. Okie laughed and said, "Come on in, barber. John'll be tickled to know you walked in on us. It proves he was right!"

THE thing they did not know was about the guns. They were accustomed to seeing him unarmed, to the belief that he never carried weapons and was not a fighter. He had been slapped around with impunity by Lige and John and they expected no trouble from him.

It was scant advantage, against two men. But Piney had the right hand gun out and was steadying it, not making a flashy attempt at a quick shot, aiming it to kill. He pressed the trigger and the gun boomed very loudly in the little back room of the shop. Okie bounced against the wall.

The second man could have had him, but Piney had counted upon Alice. She threw her weight to one side and the Kaytee hand went off balance as he tried to get in his shot. Piney cut him down with ease.

He stood there, the gun smoking. His pulse was going like a race horse. He said numbly, "First time I ever shot at a man, Alice. It—it kinda makes me sick—but he—they—were maulin' you!"

Alice said rapidly, "John Strang sent them. He suspects that I've been pumping Lige for information. He has seen you and me together. He's very smart—smarter than we thought."

Mechanically Piney filled the empty chambers of his gun. The two Kaytee men lay awkwardly upon the floor. One was not quite dead and his low moans were terrible in Piney's ears. But Alice seemed not to listen, or to care. She said, "This is war. If Slip could come in, it would be better."

He told her about Pico. She nodded. "Lige and John rode out with the posse. But they'll be back. Strang is the best sign reader in the country."

Piney said, "I'm not running. I'm through with sneaking around."

She said, "They'll kill you, Piney. You're no crack shot. You're no killer."

Piney put the gun back in the holster. He said, "I'm good enough. Slip said so. Barbers have steady hands, Alice. I may not be so swift on the draw—but I won't miss Lige or John."

She insisted, "You should ride out, circle them, and bring Slip and Pico back."

"I'm going back to my shop," said Piney grimly. He bent and seized the heels of the nearest dead Kaytee man. The corpse was amazingly heavy, but he tugged it through the back door and into the alley. He dragged the other one after, piling them neatly. He panted, "Stay close and don't let Strang near you. Have you got a gun?"

She said, "You must have gone crazy, Piney. You can't stay in the shop. . . ."

Piney said, "It's time to come out and fight them. They'd have hanged us all. They came after you!"

"They wouldn't have really harmed me," she said. "Piney, you must—"

He saw the real concern in her and it gave him a warm feeling. He said, "Thank you, Alice."

He went out before she could say any more.

He stepped gingerly around the two dead men and proceeded along the alley to his shop. He went through the rear door and there were four men playing pool, local fellows, not Kaytee men. Their eyes bugged at the sight of him, then they turned as one and fled.

He put up the pool cues and straightened the balls in the rack. The cue ball rolled about on the green cloth. It stopped near the side pocket. Piney grinned at it, then went to his razors and began stropping the one he had nicked upon the sheriff's forearm.

He finished the task, put the razor in his pocket and looked at his watch. It was his regular closing time, so he reached up and turned off the lamps. The friendliness of the dark, familiar shop was a comfort. He sat in the chair with his feet propped up and waited.

THEN he heard the sound of the horses he stretched, dropped his feet to the floor and listened, hunched, a slight, insignificant figure. The word would be out, spread by the pool players, that Piney Talcott was in town, in his shop. He heard loud voices, then footsteps. He hitched the guns into place and took a place near the pool table.

In the rear were other, stealthier sounds. He wheeled and called in a low voice, "Slip?"

"Yeah," came the reply. "I'll lay low. They're on their way, a passel of 'em!"

Piney said, "It's all right, Sip. Don't get hurt and take care of Alice. I'm ready for 'em. I'm tired of—"

The door shattered under a sudden attack. Kaytee men surged, yelling. Piney drew the right hand gun and held it on them, steady as a rock. The left gun was for use only when the other was empty, as Slip had taught him. He said:

"Back up there, you all!"

Lige came pushing through. The Kaytee men stood under Piney's guns, unbelieving, hesitant, unable to see plainly in the light reflected from the street lamp.

Lige said, "You dirty little murderer!"

His hand dipped down. His big body hunched, his eyes flashed, the Kaytee men came to life.

Piney fired once, twice. He said clearly, "Get your gun out, Lige. I'm givin' you evens!"

Lige whipped out his weapon. Two Kaytee men were staggering. From the rear of the shop there was a rattle of fire. The other gunslingers were milling, caught in hot water, surprised by the crossfire. Lige stepped forward as if to throw his bullet with the strength of his big body.

Piney held the gun at hip height, aiming by pointing a metaphorical fingertip. He pressed the trigger evenly, watching Lige. Then he stepped aside, quickly.

Lige's gun burst into flame. Piney's left arm spun, the gun dropped from his fingers.

He saw Tom Mason coming across the street. The other Kaytee men were stopped, for Tom was carrying a shotgun, menacing

the crowd. Lige took another step, then seemed to buckle at the knees. Upon his face was an expression of utter amazement and disbelief.

Piney heard the shots from the doorway, but only his left arm seemed damaged. He saw John Strang leap away from the mob and managed to duck aside as the big man began blasting with two guns, smashing glass, sending the lead through the shop.

Piney put down the gun to steady himself. The shock of the bullet wound in his arm was wearing off. His hand touched the cue ball and some instinct bade him pick it up.

He held it in his right hand as John Strang came through the door, brave as a lion, going to the attack without thought of anything but the kill. His wolfish, thin lips curled back and he balanced on his tiny feet, seeking Piney in the whirl of black smoke and the sound of popping guns. Piney drew back and threw the pool ball with all his might.

The gun in John's hand flew wide. The ball struck the side of his head, driving him back, shutting off his vision.

Piney reached for the gun on the table. Pico wailed, "John got Sleep! It is bad, senor!"

Piney got the gun up. Strang was coming about, drawing a weapon from his waistband. Strang said, "I'm finishin' you now. It shoulda been done long since, you damn barber!"

Piney held the gun steady. He fired. There was an empty, horrible click.

PINEY doubled over, his left arm dangling useless. His right hand found the razor and he dove forward, into the fire of Strang's gun. He felt the lead whack into him, but he could not even tell where, now that he was going to finish it, once and for all. *Tom Mason, Junior, Alice—the quiet little people of the town—they would have peace again, if he could only go on. . . .*

He locked his wounded left arm over John Strang's gun. He deflected the muzzle, whipped the razor once, twice. He staggered away, collapsed over the pool table.

He heard Strang go down, heard Tom Mason saying levelly, "There'll be no more violence. I'll blast the first man who moves. There's a new deal coming to Saddleville!"

He would have to get a new cover for the pool table, he thought, if he did not stop bleeding all over it. He essayed to move and knew then that Strang's bullet was in his shoulder muscles, on the left side, and he could get along pretty well. He had to see Slip. . . .

He got to the back of the shop and Alice was there, trying to stop the bleeding. But there was a hole in Slip's chest, on the left side. Strangely, Slip's face looked young again, like it used to, before the Kaytee made an outlaw of him. He looked up at Piney and said clearly, "We did it. Both Lige and John. You got 'em both, Piney. Guess I taught you to hold that ole hogleg steady, didn't I? Guess you'll rebuild Corner Z pronto, huh?"

Piney said, "The doc'll be here . . . you'll be all right."

Slip smiled and said, "Now it's you who will take care of Alice . . . so—long, folks. It was a good fi—"

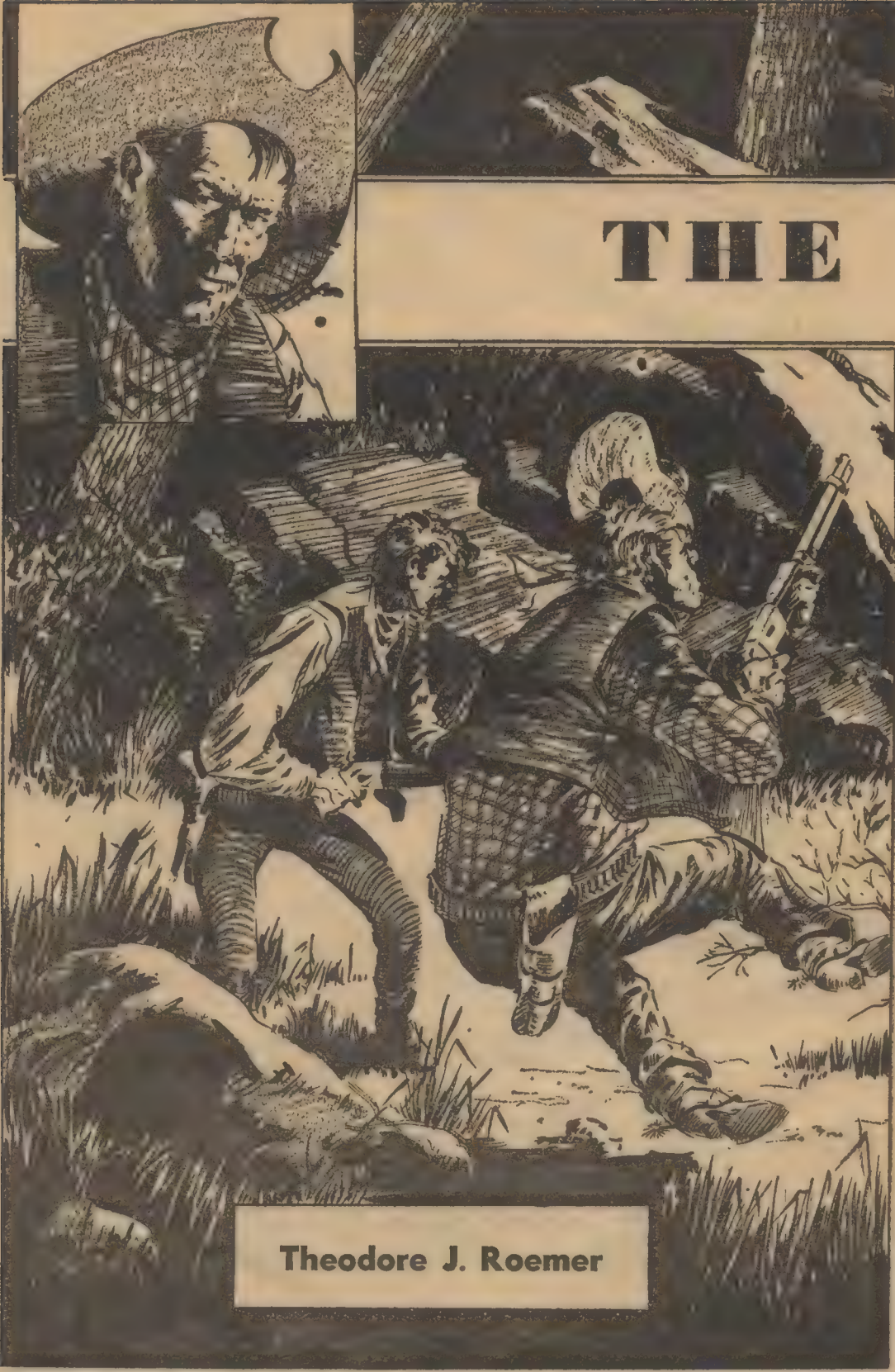
He died, smiling. Pico sobbed once, then was still. Piney lurched away, leaning against the wall. But outdoors he heard Tom Mason saying, "That's right. You Kaytee riders fork your brons and get out. And don't come back. The undertaker'll clean up for you!"

The little farmers and the ranchers would be coming back. Out to the mesa, the land would be peaceful again. Slip was dead and Piney was feeling ill himself—but Saddleville was cleared of unrest.

There was still work to be done. Piney had to go help Tom Mason. . . . He actually made four steps towards the front door before Alice caught him and eased him into the barber chair. He murmured, "Got to have peace—no matter how hard we fight for it."

She was weeping, but she was holding on to him. The doc was coming and Piney knew he would live, all right. He could feel it in his aching bones and in the pressure of Alice's strong hand. He would live to see peace over Saddleville—his town.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Fifteen Western Tales, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1943. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Fifteen Western Tales, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are; Publisher, Fictioneers Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Fictioneers Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Popular Publications Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgages, and other security holders, owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September 1943. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 18, Register's No. 4W359. (My commission expires March 30, 1944.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.



THE

Theodore J. Roemer



GUTLESS KID



He stood in front, facing their guns.

RAG LARKIN was conscious of the .45 strapped to his side. He had just turned nineteen and had never worn a gun into Twin Forks before. He rode stiffly, his patched Levis tight against his long, young legs, his square, unfilled shoulders held back and challengingly erect.

He saw the surprised eyes of the loafers before the saloon follow him, and he heard one say in astonishment, "That Tom Larkin's kid?" He rode on, eyes straight ahead.

Down the street he saw a man and a girl ride out of the livery yard and toward him.

When you wear a dead man's guns for the first time to take up where a better man left off—you're buying into a solo game where you fill your hand—or die!

They hadn't seen him and Rag Larkin wanted to turn down a side street to avoid them, but he rode on down the dusty main street of Twin Forks. He didn't hate Don Perry as his brother, Steele, did. And as for Jean Buckley, he knew his place.

He rode wooden-faced toward them, breathing deeply, trying to fill the worn leather vest that had been his dad's. Stiff pride showed in his every movement.

Don Perry saw him first. He spoke to the

girl and reined in. She drew up beside him.

Perry said, "Hello, Larkin."

Rag nodded. He touched his hat to the girl, "Lo, miss." He started to ride past.

Perry put his horse before him. "Wait a minute." The foreman of the Broken Spur was smiling. He had a nice, white smile. He had nice eyes. Rag remembered Steele had always said everything about Don Perry was too nice to be honest.

Perry said, "You haven't heard anything, that you're totin' that iron?" Rag didn't understand the undertone in the question. He looked into the lean, handsome face, and some of the tight bitterness that had come over him since he'd been left living alone on the Arrow spread tightened his throat.

"They's a reason, all right," he said curtly. "Arrow cattle don't wander off the range by themselves. I've seen plenty of hoss tracks amongst 'em. And there's only two spreads up at that end of the valley; mine and the Broken Spur."

"It's a lie, Rag Larkin," the girl burst forth. "How dare you insinuate Broken Spur punchers are shoving your stock! Where would we hide it? We aren't shipping. Don't you—"

"The boy has hallucinations," Perry cut in, apparently relieved. "Go ahead, kid—shoot hell out of any Broken Spur men who show up that way." Thinly veiled amusement shone in his sky-blue eyes. And underneath the amusement Rag saw the contempt.

He felt his bony cheeks warm with the anger in his throat. The range considered him just a kid, and a gutless kid at that, because he didn't follow in the footsteps of his dad and older brother, Steele—drinking, gambling, wearing a sixgun and having time only for fine horses and letting the ranch go to hell.

Rag loved fine horses as the close-hitched young Morgan under him showed, but as for the rest of it, it wasn't in his blood. Steele had carried a six-shooter since he was fifteen; Steele had never been out of scrapes. Steele, the range said, had more sheer guts and deviltry than any two men in Twin Fork valley. Maybe, they said, that was why Rag Larkin had none.

RAG looked Don Perry in the eye and said, "I ain't got no hallucinations, Perry. There isn't a track I can't read, and they all head for Broken Spur range. Now git that hoss outta my way or I'll ride over you."

With an easy laugh Perry pulled his horse out of the way and Rag rode past them down the street for the hardware store.

He dismounted, noted there was an unusual number of horses at the rail. There

was a crowd in the hardware store. Some saw him. There was a bustle of excitement. Rag swung his gun free, awkwardly but deliberately, and pushed open the door.

When he had been a kid of seven or eight, he used to watch his dad, Long Tom, fetch the black-butted .45 that was his dad's constant companion from its holster and blaze at rocks and things. And his dad was lightning fast—and deadly.

But his dad had died—at the hands of a faster man in that very saloon up the street.

Then his brother, Steele, began wearing the black gun and blazing away at rattlers and poplar stumps, and Steele got to be pretty fast with the Colt.

Then, one night three weeks ago, when Steele was on a bender, having had words with Jean Buckley and been ordered off the Broken Spur by Don Perry, the stage carrying the gold from old Sage Buckley's mine on Little Claw mountain was held up. The driver was shot and two miners riding in the stage swore the leader of the band rode a horse with a white blaze and four stockinged feet.

The horse had come home that night, riderless, and later Steele came on foot, cursing, half drunk, a heavy welt of a gun bruise on his forehead.

"Somebody clouted me as I left the saloon," he told Rag. "I woke up down by the canyon."

The next day the sheriff came and Steele went off to jail cursing and vowing vengeance on the men who'd framed him.

After that, the black Colt hung unused in its holster above the kitchen door and Rag, just turned nineteen, had decided a man could get along without a .45 belted to his hip—until his meager herd had begun dwindling.

He pushed into the hardware store and saw Sam Daley there, Joe Bender, Tom Reed; then his eyes widened a little for old Sage Buckley, boss of the Broken Spur, was in the midst of the group and he had been doing the talking.

Rag walked to the counter and all eyes, in the sudden silence, followed him. Judd Beaver, the proprietor, hobbled forward on his wooden leg. Rag said:

"Four boxes shells. Forty-fives."

JUDD BEAVER glanced at Sage Buckley; then put the shells on the counter. Ray took silver from his Levi's, paid for the shells, and with them in his big, bony hands started for the door.

"Hold on, younker," Sage Buckley's harsh voice boomed forth. "Who you getting them shells for?"

"Who do you think?" Rag said evenly. He eyed the solid, prosperous rancher with

unfriendly eyes. In his heart he knew Sage Buckley to be an honest man and one who would never order his men to rustle a steer if it cost him the Broken Spur. But Arrow cattle had been disappearing. And then there never had been any love between Tom Larkin and Sage Buckley. Buckley was the thrifty, hard-working, solid ranch-owner.

Now Buckley's square face tightened ominously. "I reckon I got a right to know. Last night my stage was held up again and both guards killed. It come in empty of the gold."

Rag felt his lips twitch. "Guess that proves Steele didn't do it in the first place, doesn't it?" He looked stiffly at the ring of older men. They thought him just a kid. He could tell it in their eyes. And it made him angry.

"It proves something, all right," the grizzled Buckley said. "Last night your brother, Steele, hit Sheriff Proudly over the head, stole a gun and a horse and fanned out."

Rag felt his fingers grow limp. Steele—escaped! He heard Buckley go on:

"He got a gun, but only six shells. What you going to do with them cartridges?" His voice was very even now, and hard, and Rag, to prevent the boxes from slipping to the floor in his stunned amazement, gripped them suddenly.

They saw the movement.

Rag spoke, stumblingly. "I—I been practicing. My cattle been disappearing and I figured it's about time I protect 'em."

Snaggle-toothed Joe Bender guffawed. Rag forced the quick anger back into his chest.

"That's what I said," he answered grimly. "I'm through having my stock run onto Broken Spur range an' disappear. Take it or

lump it, Sage Buckley, but that's what's happening. An' I aim to do something about it. These cartridges shoot at Broken Spur punchers."

Buckley turned white, then red with fury, and finally he choked the knots out of his thick, wind-tanned neck. "We'll settle that some other time, Rag Larkin, but jest for the moment you put them shells back on the counter and git!" His voice was harsh from his fury.

Rag stiffened. He had a gun. Some of the others wore guns. They were old men, but he had a right to these shells—

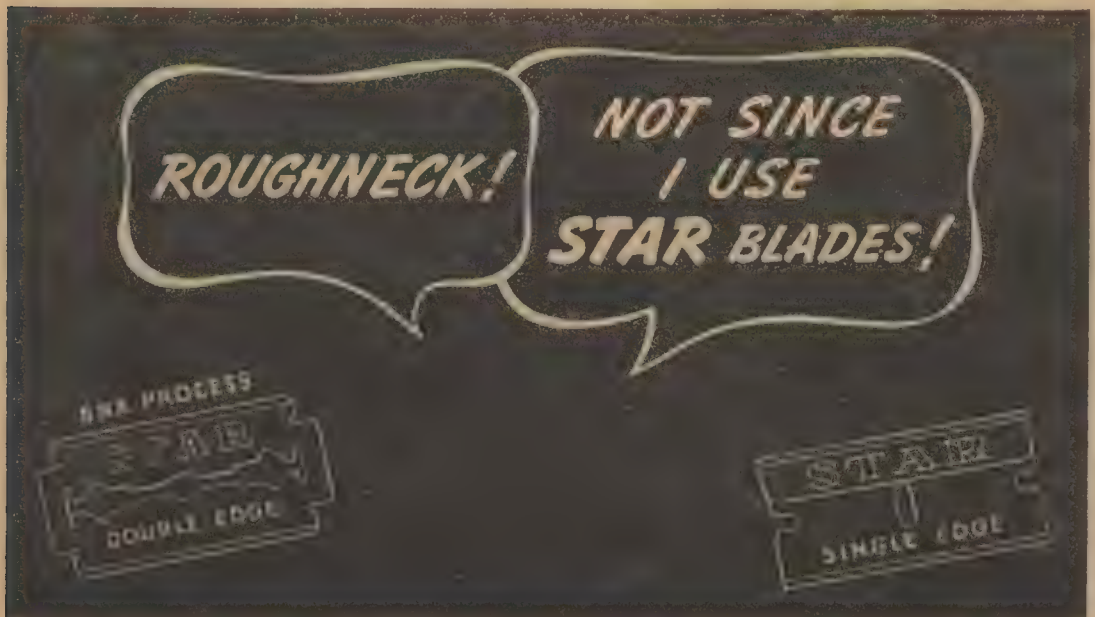
A door creaked to his right and Don Perry stood there smiling. In his soft-leather boots and soft gray shirt he made a fine, six-footed picture. His sky-blue eyes were laughing toward the gaunt, ill-clad Arrow spread kid.

"I reckon you heard the boss," Perry drawled.

Rag looked at the ungloved hand on the silver-butted Colt at Perry's right thigh. Perry was good at throwing iron. Damned good. Even Steele had grudgingly admitted that.

Rag spoke finally through tight lips, "I got six cartridges left in my gun, the same number as Steele has got. I reckon that will be enough." He put down the shells, wheeled and strode from the store.

AT THE side door he saw Jean Buckley sitting on her pinto, waiting with Don Perry's horse, and by her frightened eyes Rag knew it had been Perry who'd decided to come back, probably to force him into a gun-fight.



The thought fanned Rag's already flaming anger. He flung his lean, ragged-clothed legs over his Morgan and spurred before her.

"Steele didn't do any robbin' and killin' and you know it! He wouldn't hurt you or no one—unless riled!" He felt like a ragged uncouth kid before her brown, womanly eyes, although he knew she wasn't as old as he was. "And what's more," he went on hotly, trying to choke down the feeling with a rush of brave words, "We'll show you Buckleys! We'll—I'll—"

He snapped his teeth together as he realized he was making kid-like boasts. He jerked the Morgan around on its haunches and, spurred, the horse leaped for the open street. He clattered out of Twin Forks in a furious storm of dust that settled over the wondering loafers before the saloon. And the one who'd spoken before, said,

"I reckon that Larkin younker's come alive at last. I allus figgered he'd bust loose some day."

Rag rode the mesa trail home. If Steele were loose he'd be more apt to run into his brother up there, than on the valley road. Broken Spur used the valley road almost exclusively.

But he didn't meet Steele, even when he passed the wilderness of rock and granite that in some age-old past had been spewed down the side of Big Claw Mountain to form a practically impassable barrier up and over the formidable mountain to the range on the other side. It was called "The Rocks." When Tom Larkin and Sage Buckley had staked out in Twin Fork Valley, it had been the hide-out of renegades and outlaws, but years ago it had been cleaned out and its myriad trails and thousand hiding pockets had long since been forgotten.

Rag skirted Broken Spur range, rode the mine road for a piece until it entered the deep forest of Little Claw, then struck out across the scrub pines and lush pocket meadows for his own ranch.

The mountain twilight was thick over pine-clump and trail as Rag shoved through the last screen of jackpine to dip into the long, shelving slope that was the headquarters of the Arrow spread. He peered intently at the drab, rambling ranch house in hope of a light, before he remembered that Steele would be foolish to light a lamp. He would be foolish even to come home, but in his heart Rag knew Steele would come. The Larkins stuck together. And with the thought he spurred down onto the flat.

Steele wasn't there. Rag lighted the kerosene lamp, shined the chimney and put it purposely near the window. Then he began rustling some grub.

Steele would be hungry.

THE fire began crackling in the big kitchen range. The rising wind coming off Little Claw sucked at the great ranch chimney. The light shone bright and steady in the long room that once had seated a dozen cowpunchers.

Rag stood at the open door, where he had thought and dreamed his plans scores of times as he gazed over the moonlit range, but tonight he wasn't thinking of cattle and fencing and range grass; he was thinking of Steele and what he could do to help his brother.

A lawyer over in Chilcoot had said he could get Steele a new trial if more evidence was brought up—but the lawyer said he'd have to have five hundred dollars in addition to the new evidence, and Rag had neither. He hadn't even had the cattle to sell since the rustling had begun.

It began raining softly as he stared into the wet night and it came to him with a startling flash that none of their meager stock had been rustled *before* Steele had gone to jail. It was *after*! Someone knew the case could be opened up! Someone didn't want a new trial! Rag grew rigid with the thought.

The click of a horse's hoof against rock brought him up sharply. Steele? No. If it were Steele, his bother would come fast, hallooing.

Rag's hand went to his father's gun at his hip and he stepped out of the doorway light into the shadow and listened, eyes boring hard into the darkness up-trail.

Then a blue flicker of mountain lightning came and in the glimmer Rag saw a horse approaching, its rider slumped over its withers. The blue light was gone and Rag heard the click of hoofs again and knew the horse was moving slowly, hesitantly, unguided, drawn by the smell of woodsmoke. And with a curse Rag rammed the gun tight into the holster and ran out into the rain. They'd gotten Steele. . . .

A squall of rain broke over him. Another blue flicker of lightning. He saw the horse alone now, anchor-tied by reins to the man at his feet. The man had fallen from the saddle.

Rag scrambled in the mud to the man's side and rolled him over. It wasn't Steele!

He peered closer and in the blue light saw it was Jeb Kimball, a Broken Spur puncher. "Kimball!" he muttered, then his fingers touched wet stickiness on the man's chest and he knew the Buckley man had been riding a long time with a bullet wound. He leaned close, got the unconscious man on his powerful shoulders, then walked steadily through the rain for the ranch house kitchen.

Kimball was still alive. He put the moaning rider on a cot besides the range stove

and opened his shirt. He saw an ugly mass of coagulated blood low in the left shoulder; it spewed blood slowly in the center, with faint, measured pumps—it would soon be all over for Jeb Kimball. The lead had blazed too close to the heart.

He looked to the elderly man's ash-gray face and the lips moved. Rag bent low to catch what they said.

"... I was chasing strays in The Rocks ... they robbed the coach ... tried to stop 'em ... plugged me ... I got away—holed up—" His voice gasped fainter. "Steele Larkin was with 'em ... tell old Sage ..." The voice sank and Rag could make out no more. He looked at the graying lips upon which death was fast implanting its seal, and he felt numb with horror at what he had just heard.

A man wouldn't lie on the doorstep of death!

HE STRAIGHTENED. He looked down at the dead puncher. And an unseen weight seemed to fall onto his shoulders. The wind souged through the pines outside and the rain slapped against the windows and Rag fought the bitterness, the loneliness, the doubt in his young soul, and finally he turned away and dragged out his slicker and began making up his pack. He'd go to Steele.

The man on the cot lay still when he'd finished. Rag looked. Jeb Kimball was dead. Rag took out Kimball's gun, put it in his pack. He took off Kimball's gunbelt and shifted its cartridges to his own. He put on his slicker, then wrapped the man in a blanket and carried him out into the rain to his horse. He tied the dead puncher onto the saddle with the man's own lariat, then he got his own horse and swinging into the saddle he headed the Morgan across the flats and down deeper into the Valley toward the Broken Spur ranch house, leading the other pony and its grue-some burden.

HOURS later the sprawled buildings of the Broken Spur headquarters loomed in the wet night and Rag rode around to the front porch of the great house. A light shone and Rag was surprised; it was almost midnight.

He dismounted in the drizzle and with the butt of his .45 he pounded on the heavy oak door.

Sage Buckley opened it. At the sight of Rag Larkin, Buckley's grizzled eyes showed his surprise. "What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

Rag looked past him. Don Perry and Jean Buckley were seated at the oilcloth-covered table; evidently they'd been poring over some

ranch papers. Both were looking toward the door.

"I got a rider of yours out here strapped to his horse. He's dead."

"Dead?" Buckley said.

"Who is it?" Perry asked, suddenly coming forward. He'd now recognized Rag. The girl had, too, for she was standing with her hand to her throat. Rag saw she still had on blue jeans and riding boots, but her hat was off and her hair was a mass of brown gold in the lamplight. Her dark eyes were on him, wide, slightly terrified. Rag was puzzled. She'd looked at him like that when he'd come out of the hardware store after having been faced down by Don Perry.

He took his eyes from her and looked at Buckley. "It is Jeb Kimball. He was riding near the mine road along the Rocks when he busted into the stage hold-up. Somehow he got mixed in it and plugged. He lay somewhere tryin' to stop the blood for a day, then made a try for here but got only as far as the Arrow."

"How do you know all this?" Buckley asked hard with suspicion.

Rag flushed. "Think I plugged him?"

Buckley's bulldog jaw was working. "I heard you talkin' today, seems to me."

Rag said angrily, "He told me before he died, that's what."

"Sure—sure," Perry drawled beside his boss. His blue eyes, a little greenish in the shadowy light, flickered with the hint of a sneer. "Sure, we couldn't do anything but believe you."

Rag caught the import—Perry was calling him yellow! Anger glinted in the Arrow kid's deep gray eyes as he swung to the foreman.

"Keep at it, Perry. Some day I'll draw on you. And I won't be the slowest." His voice was low for suddenly, like his brother, Steele, he hated this man. He couldn't rightly say why.

"What did you come here for?" Buckley cut in harshly.

"I came for some men," Rag said. "Those robbers are holed up somewhere back in the Rocks and they can be hunted out by somebody who knows the trails. I know a few on the Arrow side. How about it?" In his heart he wanted to get his brother away.

The two Broken Spur men exchanged glances, then Buckley said, "Why don't you take your own?"

"I haven't any any more."

"What?"

"I let 'em all go," Rag said simply. "I figured on saving money to get Steele out of jail."

Buckley stared at his neighbor. Then he shook his thick shoulders. "An' you began

losing stock then, is that how you figure it?"

Rag shrugged. "Let's not go into that again. Do I get the men? Nic Jason, Bill Todd, Ranny Jones—they're good men."

"Not by a damn sight!" Perry cut in. "We ain't turning over any waddies to a Larkin, you can bet your hat on that. If the boss, here, says go, I lead 'em, not a gutless kid."

THE foreman's fiery words stirred Buckley. He stared out into the rain, a fierce smile on his lips. He laughed harshly.

He heard Buckley say, "So at last the proud and mighty Larkins are down to their uppers. Whiskey and gunfighting has got the best of them. Raisin' fine hosses and hell finished them. And now this youngster comes to me and asks for my men—when probably his own brother shot Jeb Kimball."

"You lie!"

It rang out, torn from Rag's white lips. He stood there quivering before them. He didn't notice the girl had gone. He said bitterly, in a strained voice, "Some day, Buckley, I'll make you eat those words. And some day, Perry, I'll burn out those devil-eyes of yours with hot lead and stamp your dirty tongue back down your throat. I'm going into the Rocks myself."

He turned and swung onto the wet Morgan and galloped off into the night, tears of rage flying from his eyes.

He was dipping over the bank of Frog creek when the muffled thud of wet hoofs behind him made him pull the Morgan into a thicket of willow and wait. Was it Perry coming to shoot it out?

A moment, and out of the blackness a slender figure appeared on a horse that showed white spots in the darkness, and Rag recognized, with a start, Jean Buckley and her pinto.

He moved the Morgan onto the trail. "Where are you going?"

She jerked the pinto so sharply it slipped off its haunches. "You startled me," she said.

"Where are you going?" he repeated.

"I wanted to catch you."

"What for?" He said it harshly. She spoke fast.

"Hal Evars was combing for steers with Kimball. He escaped and fanned home, and got all the men. They are in the Rocks now, chasing—" She stopped as if out of breath, but Rag knew it had been for another reason. He said sharply, "What's that?"

"Chasing your brother, Steele, and the outlaws," She blurted it. "Evars left a note telling us."

Rag sat still. He didn't show his surprise that they knew. But the knowledge struck deeper the knife of bitterness in his heart.

They, too, believed Steele had robbed the coach and murdered. Everybody was against the Larkins.

He cried out suddenly to her in the darkness. "Steele didn't do it! I tell you he didn't! If he was there, he had some reason! Don't—you believe in him?"

And then Rag didn't know how it was but she had her horse up beside his and her hand was on his arm. "Rag," he heard her say. "For your sake, I believe in him." She said it softly.

He stared. It was the first time in his life he'd heard her call him that. He'd never heard a woman speak in that tone of voice before. She was only eighteen, he knew. He was nineteen, almost a man. But she wasn't speaking for Steele. She was speaking for him!

He looked at her. He bent forward.

And suddenly he couldn't still the queer racing fires that sprang up in him. He was so close to her that he could see the brightness of her brown eyes wide in the paleness of her smooth face. He trembled and he wanted to put out his hand and touch her face, but he withdrew it and at his knee pressure the Morgan moved away a step.

He said, "You're a Buckley. I'm just a no-good Larkin. You shouldn't have come out here. Go back. Steele didn't rob that coach, but we Larkins have to stick together. I'm going to find him and help him." His voice was ragged. It hurt his throat.

She tried to move her horse closer. "Don't," she cried. "Can't you see they'll kill you? They'll mistake you for Steele—and if he isn't in with the robbers, the robbers will shoot." He laughed bitterly. "I know all that. I know there's been a plot against us Larkins on this range ever since Steele had enough courage to come to the Broken Spur and court you. And you can't tell me different."

He wheeled his horse and angrily put spurs to it.

"Rag," she cried. "It wasn't dad! I swear it—" Her voice was lost in the splash of water as the Morgan took Frog Creek in frenzied, spurred plunges. And he was glad to lose it. He spurred the horse on.

THE rain had let up when Rag entered the Rocks. He went into them from the Broken Spur side. Buckley's punchers would be combing the Arrow side in their search for Steele; they would figure he'd hole up in territory he knew best.

But no one knew the Rocks. And the deeper one got up into their tangled fastness where Little Claw and Big Claw came together the more he was lost in its miles of rock canyons, blind gullies, sheer drop-offs

and thousands of mountain, rock-choked streams where the touch of a loose boulder would send tons of landsliding shale onto the wayward cowboy. Rag plunged onward.

He knew the danger—he leaned forward, patted the neck of his sure-footed Morgan. "It's up to you, boy."

The night wore on. The Morgan toiled upward. In the darkness Rag let the big horse choose his own way. Around great columns of rock they moved, twisting, turning, boring deeper and deeper into the wild fastness. And Rag kept twisting his head up and to all sides, listening above the mournful sound of wind in the canyons. It sounded like a knell, giving forth a sad, ominous sound, and Rag shivered, strangely.

But no other sounds came to him, nor the scent of burning wood or the flicker of a campfire from far-off rocky walls. All was wet blackness with the wind crying and the Morgan toiling obediently forward. Hours dragged by.

Then he saw it. It was a momentary, tell-tale flicker from a great gash of red rock high in the blackness. There was a camp fire deep in that canyon! And with a murmur he urged the horse forward. This trail must lead to it.

A half-hour later he slipped from the Morgan and snakebellied to a little rim of rock. He looked down into a saucer-shaped gulch. Two men were crouched around a red fire. A third lay, half in the shadows, in a cavern behind them. Horses stood in the darkness to the right.

Rag looked and, as the firelight leaped momentarily, his heart turned over sickeningly.

There clear, in the red glow lay his brother Steele, asleep.

For a long minute Rag lay there trying to fight down the feeling in his throat. That these men were the outlaws there wasn't a doubt. He could see the heavy saddle packs lying on the ground; he could see additional pack horses. And Steele—he'd timed his break to coincide! He'd broken jail and joined them!

How long he lay there in the wet rocks wishing the Colt in his hand was a Winchester, he didn't know, but a sound behind him that wasn't the Morgan aroused him. He started to turn.

"Reach, hombre," a hard voice said. "An' drop that gun."

The .45 clattered to the rocks. Rag swore through tight lips. He'd never dreamed they'd post a guard in this wilderness.

"Back up now," the man said. "Go around that big rock an' take the path down." A gun poked Rag's wet shirt against his skin and he walked as directed. It was an easy trail down into the saucer.

AT THE first sounds up on the rim, the two men by the firelight had dived for rifles and to posts in the darkness. Now they came forward.

One was a little, pot-bellied man who had a black patch over one eye and a scar running across his nose as if a gun had blazed in his face. The other was gaunt, with a long bony face and horsey teeth. Both wore whiskers. Both were incredibly dirty, in torn shirts and hanging Levis.

"What did you find, Tad?" One-eyed called out.

Rag was walking forward. His eyes were on his brother. Steele hadn't moved. Then they came closer and Rag saw Steele was gagged and bound hand and foot! And, although his eyes were open, he had a great gash over his right eye and there were a dozen bruises about his head. He'd put up a fight. . . .

Steele's gray eyes lighted with recognition. Rag started to go forward when his captor yanked him back.

"Hold on. Who the hell are yuh? What you doin' up here?"

"He's Larkin's kid brother!" One of the others shouted. "That's Rag Larkin."

Rag looked at the man who'd spoken—the tall, gaunt one. He didn't know the other. Rag said, drawling: "I was just traveling through—"

"The hell you were!" The man behind him spun him around and Rag saw his captor was the largest of the trio, a great giant of a man with a flowing red beard. A hand closed around his throat. "Why did you come up here? How did you find your way?"

Rag looked at the raised gun. He was scared; he knew it, but he couldn't show them he was. He said, "I'm looking for my brother. A cowpuncher came to the ranch, wounded, said he was up here."

"You come alone?"

Rag nodded. And a little bitterness crept into his voice. "I tried to get some of Sage Buckley's men but he wouldn't let them come."

The bitterness made it convincing. The leader gave him a shove to the other two. "Tie him up," he said curtly, and he cursed something unintelligible about being held up here which Rag couldn't get. Horse-face and One-eye pushed him toward the cave and the little man gave Steele a kick. "Roll over an' make room for your kin."

The blow stung Rag. He had his hands free. With one motion he sent a right fist against the man's good eye. The outlaw dropped. Rag choked out:

"Kick my brother, will you—"

A blinding, whirling darkness closed in on him and he pitched senseless to his face

from the hard blow of Horse-face's gunbutt.

HE OPENED his eyes. They hurt. There was a tearing pain running from his temples to the back of his head. He tried to focus his aching, misting eyes, but couldn't, then he heard something close to him and memory came back. He was tied up. He was in the same cave with Steele. He tried to fight the fiery cobwebs dragging over his brain. He turned his body. And his eyesight cleared.

Steele was speaking in a whisper from under a loosened gag. "You put up a good fight, kid, but you shouldn't have. It was two agin one and they had guns."

Rag tried to answer but the filthy neckerchief knotted through his mouth prevented him. Steele went on quietly:

"They're waiting for someone, been here two days. I knew they'd spring another job. That first one didn't give them enough dust to make a haul."

Rag nodded, signifying for Steele to go on, and the older brother continued, as if eager to clear himself.

"A month ago I met these three gents in Twin Fork and was drinking with them. When I left someone slugged me. Remember I told you about the three strangers? In jail I got to thinking back and remembered one let slip something about Perry. I began putting things together in jail there. Kid, Don Perry is at the bottom of the whole damn mess!"

One of the men at the fire half-turned as if listening. Then the wind began to moan once more, and Rag was glad.

"Perry came here four years ago, a grub-liner on the move," Steele went on. "Perry ain't his real name, but no one knew that and he dug in. When he got to be foreman of Broken Spur he begin getting ideas. But I put a crimp in his plan. I was a no-good, but Jean always sorta distrusted Perry an' I knew it. So what's he do but bring in some of his old pards an' frame me, one guy using my horse during the hold-up, then lettin' it loose to come home alone."

Steele's muffled voice went on in the darkness of the cavern. "They got them box canyons yonder jammed with steers ready to make their break-away," Steele whispered. "An' a lot of Broken Spur stuff Perry doesn't know about."

Rag's eyes asked the question and Steele read it. He answered, "What they waiting for? They need papers to ship them cattle, I figure, and Perry is forgin' em, probably to tie up with some crooked shipper he knows across the range."

Rag nodded. Now he understood why Hal Evars and Jeb Kimball were rummaging

in the Rocks. The Broken Spur punchers had been missing stock also; they'd accidentally run into the outlaws just at the moment Steele was trying a one-man-posse arrest on his own. There'd been a three-way gun-battle. The outlaws had captured Steele. Jeb Kimball and Hal Evars escaped in different directions but with the same story: Steele Larkin was with the outlaws!

RAG moved, trying the rawhide that bound his hands behind him. It was stiff and hard. He strained and pulled the leather into his flesh.

Steele whispered, "Good kid. You came to me, Rag. But you can't get loose from that damn rawhide. I've tried all night."

Rag's eyes showed his fear momentarily, and Steele said, "If we get a break, kid, I'll kill that Perry with my bare hands!"

Rag looked down at Steele's leg which lay in a peculiar position. He'd thought there was an odd grayness about his brother's face when he first entered the cave, and Steele saw his glance. Steele said, "She's busted all right. But we'll get a break before they chuck us over one of these canyons. By God, I've got one coming."

Rag heard the shaking desperation in his brother's voice and knew that if there was a break coming, he would have to make it. Steele with a busted leg was helpless. He began straining at the rawhide, which now he could feel was softening with blood.

Suddenly there was a scuffle on the rim above. And again both renegades by the fire grabbed rifles and dove for the shadows.

In wonder the two Larkins watched from the cave and in a moment the big, red-bearded outlaw came down the path. And shoved ahead of him at gun muzzle was Sage Buckley!

Rag lay back, limp with astonishment. Buckley! What was he doing way up here?

"Right popular place around here," the leader growled. "Who the hell's this gink?"

"Gink! Why thet's old Buckley! He owns the Broken Spur! He's Trask's boss—"

"Shut up!" The outlaw leader spun, cracked One-eye across the mouth, and in the cave Steele swore. Rag heard him say, "Trask! That damned murderous killer! So that's who he is. Sam Trask from Abilene!"

And then Rag knew Steele meant Don Perry.

One-eye crawled to his feet whining. "What the hell's the difference? They all go over a cliff fer buzzard's bait anyway."

"This guy, too?" Horse-face asked. "Hell, Tad, we're gettin' into pretty high stakes now."

The leader looked around the rimrock,

where the gray of dawn was beginning to touch. "I don't like it," he muttered. "Too many's been gittin' in here."

One-eye said, "Hell, let's toss these nosey guys over an' drag."

"Yeah," Horse-face said. "We got the swag. To hell with the cattle."

Avarice gleamed in the big man's eyes. "No," he said. "Them beeves will bring as much as twice the gold. He said he'll be here at sun-up, an' he will. He'll be damn glad to be shut of us. Tie Buckley up."

He returned to the rim and the other two tied a cursing Sage Buckley and threw him into the cave. Then silence once more was over them and over the camp of the outlaws.

RAG was working furiously on his bonds. He felt pain no longer. Once loose—his thoughts raced on—maybe they hadn't searched Buckley. He knew the rancher always carried a pistol in a shoulder holster. Once his hands were free—

He looked up to the jagged peaks of Big Claw. Gray light was softly beginning to outline the slopes. In a few minutes dawn would break.

He wrenched savagely. One hand was coming free. He pulled again and brought it forth. He looked at it and it was bleeding, unfeeling. Disregarding the pain he forced it to claw off the rawhide from the other hand. Buckley and Steele watched him.

Rag lay still a moment as One-eye got up and walked toward them. The man looked at them in the darkness and Rag thought his heart would give him away, but then with a curse One-eye returned to the fire. "Damn.

Thought I heard something moving out there."

Quickly Rag reached up and ripped off his gag. He got Buckley's .45. Then Steele whispered. "There's a knife in my hip pocket."

Rag silently got it. He ripped Steele's bonds and Buckley rolled over for his to be slashed. The movement of his big body on the gravel of the cave bed, brought the two at the campfire up fast.

But not fast enough.

"Drop those guns," Rag said.

"You first, Horse-face," Rag continued. "Unbuckle your belt and let it slick to the ground; then step away. You next, One-eye."

They obeyed. Rag gave Steele the .45. "Cover 'em, while I get those rifles."

He started out of the cave when something burned his left shoulder and he spun back into the cave involuntarily as the crack of a Winchester echoed from the rim.

"Damn. I thought he'd be down the trail," Rag muttered.

"We need them rifles," Buckley said, "or he'll pot us from the other side like rats in a grain barrel."

Steele said, "Like hell he will. You two! Come close here. Lay down in front of us."

In the dawning light, both paled. "He'll shoot us!"

"What the hell you think he'll do to us!" Rag said, tearing his shirt away from the bullet crease on his shoulder. "Make 'em roll those rocks here, Steele. One at a time."

"Hello down there," the leader's voice called.

"Throw out that gun and come out."



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"Git us out," Steele flung back at him. He'd crawled to the lee of the cave's mouth. Rag saw he was white with pain. He went over and without taking his eyes from the two renegades frozen between two fires, took the gun from his brother's hand.

"Ease back," Rag muttered. "I'll handle them."

Rag stepped before his brother and crouched there. "Buckley, you git back of me, too. All right, you two wolves. Pack them boulders over here pronto." His voice rasped.

The sharp explosion of a single gun shot echoed from the rim.

Rag jerked as if he'd been hit. "What was that?" It had been a light, clear crack, as if of a small caliber gun. Buckley's voice broke behind him in excitement.

"Jean! It's Jean's thirty-eight! She followed you an' I followed her."

Rag half turned. "What's she doing up here?"

The half-turn was a fatal mistake. Both renegades dived for their guns. Rag came around, sighted on Horse-face. The gun exploded in his hand. Horse-face fell groveling to the sand, but One-eye had dived in a dodging, twisting run. The gun in Rag's hand kicked back again but One-eye's craftiness saved him. Rag missed, and then One-eye had his gun. Rag felt rock chips hit his cheek inches to the right; then he saw One-eye going down.

The man was trying to bring his gun up again. Rag ran forward. He kicked, sent it flying.

Buckley came out breathing hard. "Larkin, that was good work."

Rag looked back. Steele had fainted.

RAG put the smoking Colt back into his holster. "Get some water for Steele," he ordered. He bent over the dying outlaw.

The man's eyelids winked. Fear shone in his face. "I'm dying. I'm dying," he mumbled. He clutched the blood welling from under his belt.

Rag grasped his shoulder. "Tell me about—"

"Do you really want to know?" a soft voice drawled behind him, and turning Rag saw Don Perry. And Perry had twin silver-budded sixes aimed at his heart.

Perry's white sombrero was cocked jauntily back on his black, curly hair. His lean, handsome face was smiling and the sky-blue eyes were smiling; he was like a deadly cat crouching there.

"I'll tell you all you want to know, Larkin—because it won't do you any good. I was the brains of the outfit. I wanted old Buckley's daughter. Then your brother began stepping

on my toes. I saw she didn't go so much for me and thought it was him, so I decided to break him and the Arrow spread. An' it was easy, him being a fighting, reckless sort, wasn't it?"

Rag stood there, staring. He said nothing. He knew Perry didn't see Steele, unconscious in the shadowy cave. Buckley was out of sight.

Perry laughed throatily. "You know I had never figured you in this, kid. It wasn't me or your brother she wanted. She wanted you! A gutless punk! Old Buckley calls you that."

He chuckled.

"Put them guns up, Sam Trask, and I'll draw with you," Rag said. He was shaking with his anger.

Surprise showed momentarily in Perry's eyes; and Rag went for his gun. He saw Perry's twin sixes belch fire and he felt slugs tearing into his body, but his own .45 was kicking in his hand and a little round hole appeared in Perry's brown, laughing face, and Perry's guns stopped.

The surprise deepened into utter astonishment in the sky-blue eyes. The silver-budded sixes dropped. Then Don Perry sprawled on the ground. He was dead when he hit.

Rag stared through the growing haze of red. He'd shot down Sam Trask with both Trask's guns trained on him? Impossible!

Running footsteps came from his right. Two slender arms were around him, holding him up. She was crying.

"He got you, Rag! I should have shot before! Why did you go for your gun?" She was sobbing, clinging to him, shaking.

He straightened, and felt the new pain for the first time. It was in his left shoulder, high. "Shucks," he said with a slow grin. "That kinda lets me out bein' a hero. You did the shootin'."

The haze cleared before his eyes and he saw Buckley come running around some far rocks, drawn by the shooting.

At the sight of his daughter clinging to Rag, he stopped. Then he saw the body of Don Perry. The hatful of water dropped from his hands.

Rag grinned. He put his right arm around the girl. "Jean," he said. "Do you reckon your old man will put up with the gutless kid?"

She looked up. She spoke heatedly through her tears. "He'll have to. You'll tell him!"

"You bet I'll tell the old buzzard," Rag said loudly. He saw his brother stirring in the cave, and his arm tightened around her. He knew Steele would understand.

He bent over her. She lifted her lips. And the pain went from his shoulder to his heart. But he liked it.

BULLETS AND BLOOD MAKE A TROOPER

"Take him away, somebody!" Rand yelled.



By
C.
**WILLIAM
HARRISON**

Rand Clary had licked everything in his life—both lawmen and gunmen—why not the U. S. Army? But even Rand was surprised when he finally did it!

A FREIGHTER brought Rand Clary to Fort Sandy two hours ahead of the sheriff. The day was hot, and the slow plodding of the mules through the dust of the rutty road had built up a head of impatience in Clary.

"Can't you push those bronses a mite?"

The teamster was a gaunt, weather-redened man with sun-faded gray eyes. He spat placidly at a fly droning around the hams

of his gray left wheeler and flicked his whip. "I reckon I could, but it's hot, and they's no rush. The fort's been here for twenty years, and I reckon it'll last until we pull in." He eyed his passenger with quizzical interest. "You say you're joinin' up?"

"That's what I said."

The freighter nodded gravely. They were rolling out of a cottonwood grove toward the Army fort built in the crook of a creek bend. The teamster's glance took in Rand Clary's hand-stitched boots and white felt hat, the brace of ivory handled Colts. There was a flash and high-handed arrogance about Clary that the oldster didn't miss. Clary looked more like a spoiled brat than good soldier material.

The freighter was careful to keep his tone impersonal. "I reckon you're old enough to know what you're doin', but punchin' cows ain't much like soldering. The Army ain't exactly an easy life."

Temper streaked in Rand Clary's dark eyes. "I can hand out my share of trouble," he answered shortly.

"Uh-huh, I reckon you're big enough. Only sometimes it ain't so much what a man can hand out as what he can take."

The guard passed them, and the freighter pointed to a frame building that fronted on the broad parade grounds.

"That's the adjutant's office—"

Rand Clary had just been sworn in by the officer in charge of enlistments when the sheriff's posse rode up. The company clerk, an old campaigner whose face had been moulded by long years of hard living, stepped outside at the slowing rattle of hoofs, and Clary could hear the heavy voices that came through the open door.

"Clary?" came the clerk's voice. "Yeah, there's a Rand Clary inside. You're a law-man, ain't you?"

"Sheriff Sam Cloud—from Cinco County a hundred miles south of here. I want that man Clary!"

In the adjutant's office, Randy Clary looked at Lieutenant Bill Lodge, and saw anger stir in that man's eyes. Clary grinned at the officer.

"I thought you said you left no felonies behind you," the lieutenant said sharply.

"I didn't—just a sore-headed sheriff." Clary's answer carried dry, flat mirth. "I reckon I'll go out and see what the old coot has on his mind."

"You'll stay in here!" Lieutenant Lodge snapped.

There was a stubborn, wilful streak in Rand Clary. His grin at the officer became a thing of perverse mockery, and he turned on his heel without a word and stalked out of the room.

Behind him, as he left the office, he heard Lieutenant Lodge say brittlely, "Sergeant, go get Delaney and Hulber!"

OUTSIDE the white glare of sunlight was hot and unbroken, slanting from over the Emigrant Mountains. Across the way a column of troopers was coming into the parade grounds from the day's patrol through the hills.

The posse, four dusty men, sat their mounts in a line behind Sheriff Sam Cloud, and grim satisfaction narrowed their eyes as they saw Rand Clary.

"Here's that snake-blooded hellion!" one of them grated.

The speaker was tall and heavy-shouldered, and Rand Clary stared at him with barbed derision.

"You always had more talk than nerve, Selby," he drawled bitingly.

Lee Selby came out of his saddle fast, fury darkening his heavy face.

Sheriff Cloud yelled, "No guns!" but there was no thought of guns in Lee Selby's mind. He was a man who weighed trouble before it came, knew its worth in possible returns. Gunplay would have been foolish against a man as fast and reckless as Rand Clary. So Lee Selby chose fists, shrewdly counting on his advantage in height and weight. He threw his first blow with cruel suddenness.

The blow was like a hammer sledging the side of Rand Clary's jaw. He only partially avoided it; he could have avoided it completely had it not been for Lieutenant Lodge striding in from behind him.

"You're in the Army, and the first thing you'll learn is to respect authority. I said, stay inside my office!"

The officer tried to spin Clary back toward the door of his office, but he might as well have tried to move a barn. All he did was prevent Clary from escaping that first smashing blow. He heard the impact of the fist, saw Clary's head snap back. Then he felt Clary's open hand against his chest, shoving him back roughly.

"Stay out of my way, mister!"

There was a wild, almost animal eagerness for battle in Rand Clary. His forward lunge crashed him against Lee Selby, and they locked together, slugging each other with cold fury. But that kind of a fight was a mistake for Clary—Selby had the advantage of height and weight, and behind his heavy shoulders was the strength of a rock-crusher. Clary broke away, his body aching where the big man's blows had landed.

Lee Selby followed him, a ruthless machine built for bruising and battering. But there was cunning in Rand Clary. He baited Selby off balance, then lunged in to slam

his right into the man's middle. The blow hurt, washing the dark fury out of Selby's face, and leaving only raw hatred.

Clary laughed harshly, and faded away from Selby's murderous swing. He leaped close again, ripped his right again to the man's body. This blow kinked Selby forward, lowering his guard, and gave Clary his chance. He took it, swift and implacable in the way he did it.

He tilted Selby's head back with a curving left, then put everything he had in the slam of his right against the shelf of the man's jaw. Selby went down as though his legs had been chopped from under him.

Someone muttered, "Sure, an' it was a mighty neat job!"

Clary turned, finding an intangible thread of menace in those words. The sergeant—Mike Doone—stood near the corner of the adjutant's office, flanked by two grinning troopers. They would be, Clary guessed, Delaney and Hulber, the two men Sergeant Doone had been ordered to bring up.

Lieutenant Lodge said, "Arrest him, Sergeant!"

Clary slanted a quick hot glance at the officer. "What's the matter," he asked contemptuously, "aren't you man enough to do the job?"

One of the troopers, a short, square man, started forward, frowning against a set grin. "You got manners to learn, bucko!"

Sergeant Doone said sharply, "No rough stuff, Delaney, unless he asks for it."

Rand Clary asked for it. He struck Delaney as the latter reached for him. Delaney stumbled backward, tripped and fell, came up quickly, still grinning. The three of them closed in on Clary, and he tried to break away, but they held him as if in a trap. They crowded against him, pinning his arms down, and when they were finished he was powerless to move.

When they swung him around, grim satisfaction was in Sheriff Cloud's weathered face. "You've had that comin' a long time, Clary."

The lawman slanted his irony at Bill Lodge. "Let me tell you somethin' about this hellion, Lieutenant. He was a spoiled brat when he was a kid, and he got worse as he grew up. He thinks he's the tin god with the red wagon. He's a trouble-maker to the core, but when he wrecked a saloon down in Rockville the other day he got into a scrape he couldn't buy out of with all the money he's got. I chased him for two days just to give him the taste of a jail for a change. It's what he needed."

Anger still lurked in Lieutenant Lodge's eyes. "He joined up just before you got here, but it's not too late for me to tear up

his papers. You can take him if you want him, sheriff."

Sam Cloud laughed mirthlessly. "He's a good riddance, and I know when my country's well off." He backed his horse away. "No thanks, Lieutenant," he said grimly. "Rand Clary is your worry now, and you're welcome to keep him."

RAND CLARY spent that night in the guardhouse. His first move after being locked in was to test the bars in the two small cell windows. He turned away with the knowledge that this place had been built more efficiently than most cowtown jails he had seen. Then, too, there were the two guards patrolling the building.

They brought him food, but he stubbornly refused it. His temper had never known the curbing influence of a hickory stick during his childhood, and as he grew older it had become a thing that could not be reasoned with, hardening the crust of his arrogance and false pride. It never occurred to him that he might be in the wrong, because never in his life had his will been opposed.

Later that night he was grudgingly sorry he had not accepted the food. He hadn't eaten since the day before.

Once the sun was down behind the Wyoming mountains, darkness came quickly, and life in the post settled into its old groove. Across the chilling air, he could hear a not too harmonious quartette singing in one of the barracks and, when the tune was gone, the good-natured bickering around a penny ante poker game. Somehow those familiar sounds reminded him of punchers ending a hard day around a range campfire. Later, a bugle sounded, and lights dropped out of barracks windows.

A bugle's music broke Clary's deep sleep, then a short while later someone shook his shoulder.

"Hit the floor, soldier."

Rand Clary rolled over on his bunk to stare up at the weather-reddened face of a trooper.

"Go away, mister."

The trooper grinned tightly. "You're in the Army, cowboy! You're already late for roll call. Hit your boots!"

Clary said, "Are you going to let me sleep, or do I have to bust your nose?"

The trooper's grin faded. "Soldier, you're finished with your sleep whether you like it or not. We can give you more trouble than you can hand out."

Clary rolled his feet off the bunk, stood up. "You troopers seem to have a habit of calling in help for a fight. What do you use for guts?"

Wrath darkened the man's eyes. "My name

is Castleton," he said levelly, "and I'm never hard to find around here. Anytime you want to get personal, just let me know."

"I'll put you on my list," Clary said grimly.

He stood the formality of roll call, then heard the first sergeant hand out the morning's work details.

"Private Clary will report to Lieutenant Lodge," the non-com completed, "after he is given an outfit."

In the uniform they issued him, Rand Clary stood in front of the officer's desk. There was a faint smile of contempt on Clary's lips. That rebellious streak in him was a dark heat running through his nerves. He didn't like authority, unless it was his own, and he liked nothing that threatened to curb his own will.

Lodge said without a trace of malice, "You've got a lot to learn, Clary."

"That's a matter of opinion," he answered dryly.

Sergeant Doone, standing at one side, grunted at this, but the officer said without a change of tone, "One thing you'll learn is to say 'sir' when you're speaking to a superior."

Clary slid his derision home in a cold, flat voice, "I've never yet run up against a man who's better than me. When I do, I'll let you know, Lodge."

RESENTMENT clouded the lieutenant's eyes, but he rode that down. He knew he had a problem before him and he was tackling it in the best way he knew. Clary had been spoiled by too much money, and too much of a father's indulgence. He was like a wild horse that had never known anything but the whims of his own will. Maybe it would take brute force to tame him; maybe careful playing at the end of a loose rope. Rand Clary would be a hard man to break.

Lodge said with quiet force, "The trouble with you is you've got the idea no other man can walk on the same earth with you. But you're in the Service now, and you'll play the game according to the rules."

Clary snorted sardonically. "You might as well get this straight, Lodge. I signed on with this outfit to have a laugh on Sheriff Cloud. I won't be here long."

Grimness hardened the lieutenant's mouth. "If you ever try going over the hill, I'll send men after you. That's something for you to get straight."

"You and your crowd are tough, ain't you?" Clary said acidly. "I'll buy my way out."

The officer nodded slowly at this. "From what I've heard from Sheriff Cloud, you've got the money and influence to do it at that. You probably will buy yourself out. It takes guts to be a soldier."

Heat got into Clary's eyes, and anger thickened his voice. "Maybe you've got the guts to

argue that matter with me personally. I'd like to see how well you'd stand up to knuckles, mister."

"You may get that chance," Lodge said grimly. He said to Mike Doone, "Take him out and give him his first training, Sergeant. As long as he's here, he'll soldier like the rest."

Doone waited until after Rand Clary had left the office. Then the noncom said, "Sir, most of these cowhands are tough customers to handle, and this one is worse than any I ever ran up against. How far may I go with him?"

"Use your own judgment, Sergeant."

Mike Doone grinned. "Thank you, sir."

It was just before mess call that Doone returned to the lieutenant's office. His clothes were dusty, and there was a rip over one shirt pocket. There was a trace of dried blood near a split in the corner of his mouth, and a lump was swelling dark beneath his right eye.

"Well, I took him out and started givin' him his first lessons in drilling, sir," Doone said.

The officer waited, his face expressionless.

The sergeant smiled with rueful mirth. "I brought Delaney and Hulber along to show drill examples. Everything went along pretty smooth for about ten minutes. Clary seemed to want to show he could learn anything we knew. Then he right faced when he should have left faced, and him and Hulber bumped. It didn't take Clary three minutes to make Hulber lose all interest in drilling. And Hulber is tough!"

Lieutenant Lodge said, "I was afraid of that."

"That ain't all, sir. An hour later Delaney and Clary tied into each other, but I broke that up before he got very far. One of the patrols came in, and I used it to help Clary learn how to drill. It didn't take Clary any time at all to get half of that crowd on his list for some knuckle bustin', and I've got a hunch he can take them on one at a time and do everything he promised to do."

The lieutenant's eyes were cool and intent on the sergeant. "You seem to have had a little trouble with him yourself."

Doone nodded. "Things sort of worked out that way," he said. "Me and Clary went back of the stable for a session." He added defensively, "But I lasted longer than Hulber, and that's something with that hellion! He can throw more fists than any man I've ever obliged, unless it's Pat Delaney."

Lieutenant Lodge asked quietly, "What was it about, your fight?"

Mike Doone shrugged blocky shoulders. "You don't need any reason to tangle with that jigger."

"What was it about, Sergeant?"

Doone hesitated.

Lodge said, "It was about me, wasn't it? He was making remarks in front of the men about my nerve?"

Doone nodded uncomfortably. "But we'd have had it out sooner or later, anyhow," he argued.

Lieutenant Lodge sat there quietly behind his desk, a slender man with whiteness around his tight mouth.

Then he added, "You tell Clary I'll be glad to meet him tonight behind the commissary, after mess."

Doone said, "All right." He looked down at his own big hands, and he tried to keep all expression out of his face. But his face reddened when he brought his eyes up. He seemed to find it hard to get his words out.

"I've soldiered for twenty-five years, sir, and I never yet tried to tell an officer what to do. But this ain't a job for you, Lieutenant. Kick Clary out of the Service, or let the enlisted men handle him."

Lieutenant Lodge said nothing, and Doone went on roughly. "I'm meanin' no offense, sir, but I just want you to know you ain't got a chance against that man."

"You go tell him, Sergeant."

STRIPPED to the waist, Rand Clary waited. It seemed to him the entire personnel of the company had heard of the coming fight, and had drifted to this spot behind the commissary. All of them watched him silently, with no expression in their faces, no trace of excitement.

Lieutenant Lodge came alone around the corner of the commissary. He shook his head as the men started automatically to snap to attention. He moved through them without haste, into the arena they had formed, and there he pause to glance at them briefly. When he spoke his voice was perfectly calm.

"I'll consider it a personal favor if you men don't discuss what is about to happen here around the Fort."

That was all he said. Every man there knew he was breaking regulations in fighting an enlisted man. The officer was risking his commission, but felt that his company was made up of men who would not add to his risk by gossiping.

Lieutenant Lodge took off his hat, coat and shirt. And then Rand Clary realized for the first time the deception the uniform had played with Lodge's body. The officer was tall but not strongly made, his shoulders and arms neither bony nor muscular. Lodge turned to Clary, and squared off.

"Are you ready?"

Clary smiled sardonically. "You haven't got one good fight in you."

"I'll do all right," Lodge said calmly. He waited, then said, "I suppose you want me to start it."

He brought his hand up in a cracking slap across Clary's cheek. It was a sharp, stinging blow. It cut into Clary's control, and released a hot rush of fury. He whipped a fist toward Lodge's mouth, but he missed. He threw his right, swift and hard, but that blow missed, as the officer faded out of the way.

Then Lodge came in again, using his fists with straight, stabbing movements. Neither blow hurt much, but the man possessed a certain amount of skill that only served to whip up the heat of Clary's rage.

Clary started after his man, stalking Lodge savagely. Lodge tried to keep his distance, using his feet and arms swiftly, but Clary took two of those flicking blows to land one of his own.

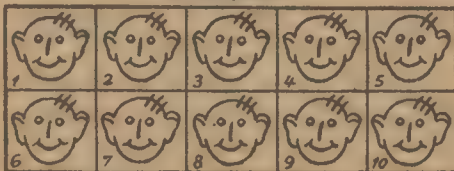
Lieutenant Lodge went down. He got to his feet, a thin worm of blood crawling through his frozen smile. He maneuvered, using all the skill he had, but it wasn't enough. Clary caught him with a left and right that seemed to cave in Lodge's middle.

Lodge slipped to his knees, but not for long. He came up, and put everything he had into a blow against Clary's mouth.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

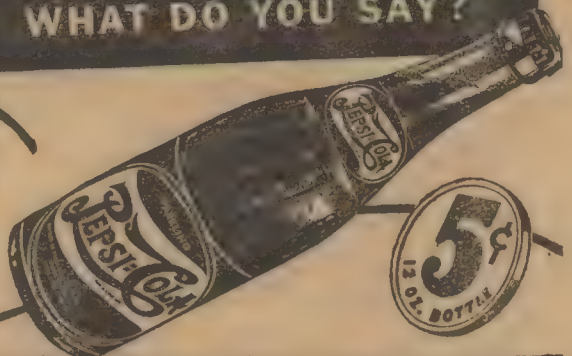
WHAT DO YOU SAY?

All the same except one... which is the odd picture?



ANSWER:

Number Five. He is only "two-haired"



He tried to get away, but now his speed was gone. Clary caught him, pumping his fists to the man's face and body. He drove Lodge to the ground twice more, but still the man managed to get up. An impotent fury hammered through Clary. The man was whipped, and he knew it, but still he wouldn't stay down. He kept getting up and taking punishment in silent stubbornness.

Clary threw a wild glance at the men around him. "Dammit, drag this fool away! I don't want to kill him!"

Lieutenant Lodge panted, "You wanted this fight, Clary," and stumbled in close again, throwing futile, powerless blows.

Clary pushed the man back. He whipped a hot glance to Sergeant Doone. He yelled harshly, "He ain't got the sense to know he's licked! Take him away, damn you!"

But Doone didn't answer. No man uttered a sound; their silence was ugly with contempt. Lodge's fist slapped against Clary's mouth. Clary spun to face the lieutenant, cursing savagely. He chopped his fist to Lodge's middle, and saw agony streak through the man's battered features. He brought up his left in a quick slashing blow to the jaw. Lodge's head snapped back. He stumbled, tripped and fell. He hit on his back, and rolled over.

He looked at Clary through red-shot eyes, blood coming from his nose and from a cut over one cheekbone. But through the blood he was still smiling in his stubborn, set way.

He pushed up from the ground, propping his weight on his arms. His nerves must have been like jerking strings, so much did the muscles of his arms quiver. He wanted to get up, and he showed that in his eyes, but he just didn't have what it took.

"Not through yet," he gasped. "Give me a minute, and I'll get on my feet."

Clary turned then, and ran. . . .

IT WAS again the chill of dawn. Rand Clary stood roll call with the rest of the company, too weary to be disagreeable. He had slept little that night, unable to get Lieutenant Lodge's battered features and unbroken will to fight out of his mind.

Always before he had met a man, fought him, and whipped him. That was all there had ever been to it. But it was different with the lieutenant. Rand Clary had a deep shocking conviction that he, not Bill Lodge, had been defeated in that fight. After all it was he who had broken away and run.

And the attitude of the men rankled him. Before his fight with Lodge, they had looked on him as a handy-fisted newcomer who would give them the pleasure of many exciting moments. They were tough, campaign-hardened men who relished a good healthy fight, without holding a grudge when they were beaten.

But now they were different. They eyed him with a cold hostility that was almost contempt. It was a thing he didn't understand, and didn't like. It angered him and unsettled his way of thinking.

Doone finished the roll, and shoved the company roster into his pocket. He about-faced, saluted, and made his report to Lieutenant Lodge, who stood behind him. After that, the sergeant wheeled, and gave his orders to the company. Clary noticed with a strange feeling of impotent anger that he was not named in those orders.

When Doone was finished, the company broke up. Clary strode across the grounds, and cornered the sergeant.

"I reckon I want a few words with Lieutenant Lodge."

For a moment Mike Doone eyed Clary intently, then he nodded curtly. "All right."

Doone swung away, and Clary followed grimly. He had been angry with himself for approaching the sergeant for leave to see Lieutenant Lodge, and now an irrational anger was riding him because Doone had not tried to make anything of it. He had expected Doone to remark that Clary had always taken what he wanted, without asking. But the man had neither said that, nor hinted it in his expression. Clary felt that he was being given the same careful leeway that they would have given a coiled rattlesnake. He didn't like it.

In the lieutenant's office, Clary faced Lodge with his mouth a thin, hard line. He noticed the marks of the fight on the officer's face, a cut and dark bruises, swollen and discolored lips. But he noticed no trace of anxiety in Lodge's eyes, and that made him feel strangely on the defensive. He countered that by trying to fan heat into his temper.

The officer nodded. "Well?"

Rand Clary hesitated, searching for something to fasten his anger on.

"What are you plannin' to do with me?" he asked harshly.

Lieutenant Lodge shrugged his lean shoulders. "What would you suggest?"

Clary swore impotently. "If you think I'm stayin' with this outfit of tin soldiers, you're crazy!"

"I hadn't given it much thought."

"I got money and influence. I'll buy my way out."

Lodge said quietly, "All right."

Clary jerked his hand savagely. He said, with forced venom, "Yesterday you had pretty definite ideas how I would act as long as I'm here, and now all you can do is pussyfoot around. If you think I'm going to loaf around here until I get my discharge, you're loco! Doone gave some of the outfit the job of movin' beef into the hills to the reservation Indians. I reckon I'll ride up there."

Lodge nodded gravely, "That's all right with me."

Clary grunted nastily. "Everything I say seems all right with you! What's the matter, have you turned chicken?"

Lodge said calmly, "I'll be glad to meet you behind the commissary again tonight if you think that."

Clary sneered. "You wouldn't stand a chance."

"The offer still goes."

"You're a damn fool!" Clary spat out. There didn't seem to be anything more to say. He was galled by the belief that in coming here he had succeeded only in making a fool of himself, and he couldn't understand how it had come about.

"I'm still ridin' with them beef," he challenged.

"Go right ahead," Lodge said. Then to Doone, "See that he gets a horse, Sergeant."

Clary swung away. He stalked to the door, halted there, wheeled around abruptly. His stare at the officer, and the curt tone of his words that followed, were brassy with defiance.

"Whatever I said about your lack of guts, I'll eat."

Then he stomped out of the room, even more surprised by his statement than were the men behind him. Sergeant Doone rolled his big eyes at the lieutenant.

"Did you hear what I heard?"

Lieutenant Lodge smiled queerly. "I think he'll make us a good man, Doone."

Doone's grin was broad as he rubbed his knuckle-bruised lips. "Maybe he will at that, if he don't get himself killed first."

Lodge said dryly, "From what I've seen, he'll more likely beat up half the company before he gets more than he can handle. See that he gets a horse, Sergeant. And maybe you'd better ride along to see how things work out."

THE day grew hot once the night chill was out of the air. Riding in the trail dust of the small herd of cattle which were to furnish food for the reservation Indians, Rand Clary watched the working of the troopers with ironic amusement. They knew soldiering from reveille to tattoo, but not one of them knew cattle.

"They're keeping them bunched too much, and they're driving too fast," Clary said to Sergeant Doone.

"Maybe you'd like to tell them how," Doone suggested pointedly.

"I could teach you gobblers a lot of things," Clary answered stiffly.

He kicked his horse away from the sergeant at a jogging trot. There was an unfamiliar feel to the Army saddle under him, but he

absorbed the gait of his mount with balanced ease. They were off the flat land, in the hills, nearing a granite-walled cut that soon would pinch the herd in tight. Drawing closer, Clary saw the nervousness of the cattle, as though the animals sensed danger. They would be easy to spook. Clary threw a quick glance toward the narrow pass, but he saw nothing in the rock rubble and brush groves that warned of trouble. He swung in toward one of the troopers heading the herd.

"Don't bunch them so much! Let them string out their own way!"

The man turned hot eyes to Clary. "I know who gives me my orders, mister!" he knifed back.

Temper flared in Clary. "The devil with you, then!"

He whipped his mount around, reined in angrily, letting the herd go past him. He picked up one of the drivers, and tried again.

"You're asking for trouble, shoving these cattle this fast. Let them set their own pace."

The trooper hipped around in his saddle with slow and deliberate hostility.

Clary tried to take a hard grip on his temper, but it slipped, jumping into its old thin-edged groove.

Clary wheeled his horse away. Here was something he didn't know how to combat. He could fight every man in the company, maybe whip him, but he knew with a strange emptiness, that would not raise their estimate of him. They thought him neither big nor important, and they didn't care how much they showed it.

But there was a stubborn streak in him that wouldn't quit. He angled his horse over, and picked up the man who was chousing the drags. It was the trooper, Delaney.

"Look, Delaney, they're moving this herd too fast. You're ridin' the drags too close. Something up ahead has got these cows spooky enough for a stampede, and if they bust back this way you might get caught."

Delaney turned a dusty, sweat-streaked face on Clary. His stare was raw with contempt.

"Well, if it ain't the trouble-eating cowboy! Are you tellin' me what to do?"

Clary held his voice steady. "I'm givin' you good advice. I know cows, Delaney—"

"But you don't seem to know when you're well off!" the trooper rapped frigidly. "Stay away from me, fellow! I don't like your kind!"

GRAY washed into Rand Clary's face. It was stronger talk than he had ever before taken from any man; but this time he took it. "Listen—I'm only trying to tell you—"

Delaney swore with sultry venom. "You listen, bucko! You may be high and mighty in your home camp, but to this outfit you're

low enough to crawl under a snake's belly! What you did to Hulber and Doone was all right; we like a good fight as well as any man. But when you took on Lieutenant Lodge, you stepped out of bounds. He's the best dam' officer in this man's army, and he's got more guts in his little finger than you'll ever have. The best thing you can do, Clary, is buy your discharge quick, and get out of here while you're still in one piece!"

Rand Clary whipped his mount away from Delaney, his mouth a thin, hard line. He rode out of the trail dust, reined in, slanted a bitter glance toward the herd now leading into the narrow pass. He had tried to do them a favor, but they didn't want any part of him. Then to blazes with them!

Sergeant Doone came jogging up to Clary. Doone said, "They're a tough outfit, Clary. It takes a good man to make them follow an order."

"I can lick any man-jack in the company," Clary said harshly.

"Maybe," Doone answered. There was a quiet force behind his words. "But that wouldn't change anything." He was silent a moment. Then he said:

"Let me tell you something, Clary. It takes more than hard fists or fast guns to get along in this man's army. Take Lieutenant Lodge, for instance. He can't fight worth a hoot, and any man in the company can out-shoot him. But he's got what it takes. A year ago Lodge and a patrol he was leading were jumped by a bunch of renegade Indians. We were in a tough spot. But Lodge rode in alone on them Sioux like they were a bunch of school kids. He bluffed their leaders into givin' up, and saved us from a massacre. When you called Lodge yellow, then beat him up, you got every man in the outfit against you."

"All right," Clary rasped. "I'm quittin' as soon as I can make arrangements."

"I reckoned you would," Doone grunted.

A COMMOTION broke out at the head of the herd. Twisting around in his saddle, Clary saw panic strike the leaders, heard the wild shout of one of the troopers up ahead.

"Grizzly!"

Then he heard the full-throated roar of the bear punching through the confusion. Terror whipped through the ranks of the cattle. They bellowed and began fighting each other. The stampede began, as swift and violent as a thought, fear-maddened cattle wheeling and rushing back out of the pass.

Doone yelled, "Look out, Delaney!"

Through the thick, boiling waves of dust, Clary saw Delaney sheer his mount around and kick it into a wild run. But he had been too close to the drags, and already the cattle

were upon him, racing in witless panic across the rocky ground. Delaney was caught up by the head of the tide of flesh and bones sweeping through the valley.

"If he goes down, he won't have a chance!" Doone shouted.

Clary grabbed the Colt from the sergeant's holster as he kicked his horse into a run. Doone yelled, "Clary, come back here!"

Clary slanted in on the head of the stampede, racing his mount beside the leaders. Now he could hardly see Delaney, yards deep in the herd. He threw out his voice in a piercing shout.

"Don't try to get out now! Ride with them!"

But Delaney didn't hear that through the chaos of bellowing cattle and thundering hoofs. He was trying to oblique his horse against the current of the herd, fighting to reach the edge of the stampede, and that was his mistake.

Clary found an opening, and drove his mount deeper into the herd, closer to the trooper. It was a touch-and-go thing to do, with all the odds against him. The ground was rock-studded and rough, and to go down now would mean certain death. He fought his way closer.

Delaney saw him, and squawled some unintelligible word. Clary made motions for what would have been futile to put into words. Delaney understood, and straightened the run of his horse. Dust boiled up from smashing hoofs, cattle bellowed madly, horn clashed against horn. Now Clary had his horse beside the trooper, and it took all his skill to keep his mount on its feet.

The trooper had skill, but he didn't have the understanding of what he was up against. A steer lunged against his horse, and Delaney tried to give away. That threw him against another steer, and his horse was knocked off balance. The animal tripped. Delaney sent out a thin, wild scream, as the realization struck him that he was going down.

Clary twisted around in his saddle, and jerked up the Army Colt. From the edge of his vision, he saw Delaney's horse sliding inexorably down in that close-packed mass of flesh and bone.

The gun in Clary's hand roared. He planted his slug between the eyes of the steer close behind the trooper's falling mount. He shifted his gun, firing now with swift deadliness, picking the steers on either side of his first kill, forming a break-wall against the tide of the stampede. He saw those steers go down and emptied his gun into the animals behind them, as he reined in beside Delaney's fallen mount.

Delaney's horse was coming up again, kicking in terror, but its saddle was emptied. Clary leaped to the ground beside the trooper,

but there was no time left for anything he might have been able to do.

As he reached out his arms, Clary saw Delaney roll a glance of horror toward the wall of dead steers Clary had made. Clary threw a glance in that direction, and he saw the steer, threshing, pitching, plunging over the bodies of the dead cattle. He had time to see those smashing hoofs, the panic-reddened eyes, the way the steer stumbled and started to fall.

Clary shoved the trooper down, then threw himself flat on the ground. That was all he could do.

Then slowly the world itself seemed to spin and come down upon him, a huge crushing weight. Utter darkness followed. . . .

PICTURES from the past first came into into Rand Clary's mind. There were pictures of his childhood when he had learned that tears and temper always won his way over an indulgent and never-firm father. Then there were pictures of later years, after his father was gone, when he had learned the power of his money, the power of his fists to batter down the will of any man who opposed him.

He had had his way then, as always before, but in the fading darkness of his mind Clary realized he had never owned the loyalty of a friend. His fists and money had never been able to win him that.

Somewhere a bugle blew, and brought new light into Rand Clary's mind. What did that tune mean?

Was it mess call? Hungry men rushing to the mess hall? Men who could feel a

blind loyalty for Lieutenant Lodge, a man who couldn't fight worth a hoot, who worked hard for the little money he earned, but who had enough guts in his little finger to win the respect of such a tough crew as this outfit?

Maybe the loyalty Lodge owned, the friendship of those campaign-hardened troopers, was the thing that really mattered. Clary found it tough to realize that, and know that the realization had come to him much too late.

He opened his eyes and the first man he saw was on the next Army hospital bunk to his—Delaney.

Delaney grinned.

"Howdy, Clary."

Clary nodded. There was something in Delaney's eyes, a healthy friend-to-friend look.

"The doc says you and me ought to get well about the same time," Delaney said. "I like a man who's handy with his fists. I think I could lick you in a good friendly fight. How's about it?"

A grin ironed the stiffness out of Clary's mouth.

"It's a deal."

Lieutenant Lodge came into Clary's vision. "I never was worth much in a fight, but I'd like to learn. Think you could give me a few pointers, Clary?"

"I'll try," said Clary, and he added, "Sir."

Then he saw that the room was crowded with troopers, and he saw that those few who weren't smiling no longer had that old hostility in their eyes.

A trooper said, "How about a cigarette, soldier."

"I could do with one," Clary answered.

CATTLE HEAVEN—COWMAN'S HELL!

When Lan Stoddard inherited that broken-down old cowsread from his uncle, he never dreamed that it was a Judas-legacy.... But when he saw the white smoke curling from the ashes of his tiny ranch house, he knew that there was only one trail left for him to ride—and somewhere along that dark and twisted pathway he'd find range-hog Shard Neblett, and take him along to hell!

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10¢

44 Western
MAGAZINE

"You ain't scarin' me, mister! Grats the only family I've got—and if the law wants him, reckon I'll have to ride the long trail, too. But I'll never be the skunk you are, lawman! I'm playin' it straight!"



This was not the sheriff he'd seen in town.

OWLHOOT DEPUTY

By JAMES SHAFFER

YOUNG JEFF CLANTON was standing in the alleyway near the bank. He was watching some kids playing in the empty corral a few feet down the street. They were playing a game called sheriff and outlaws. Jeff's eyes grew misty with the thought. He wondered how it would be to play a game that was just make-believe about a sheriff and outlaws.

The kids were about fourteen or fifteen years old; just about Jeff's age. And they were making a terrible racket. Jeff wondered how it would feel to make all the noise you wanted to. Old Grats Clanton gave him a cuff every time Jeff made too much noise.

"You gotta learn to speak when you're spoke to," Grats said.

Yeah, Jeff thought, and also you gotta learn how to be a lookout man for a bunch of long-

riders when they rob a bank, or rustle a herd. You have to learn everything, except how to be a good, law-abiding citizen. And that was what Jeff wanted to be. You have to play it straight to be a good citizen, and Grats played it every way but straight.

Jeff couldn't keep from thinking about those kids. They didn't have a care in the world. They weren't standing around with their nerves on edge, waiting to give the high sign to Grats Clanton and his bunch when the sheriff left town. They weren't wondering whether—when the shooting started—your horse would be shot from under you while the rest rode on out of town without you.

Those kids weren't worried about whether they'd get any sleep that night; or whether there'd be a posse so close on their back trail that they'd have to ride all night to lose it.

Nope, when supper time came, they'd go home to a good home-cooked meal, then set around on the front porch awhile and listen to their Maw and Paw talk before they hit the blankets. That was the way good law-abiding citizens lived.

Something welled up in Jeff's throat and he had to choke it back. He gulped, then dug a grimy fist into his eye to scrub away the mist that threatened to form there.

"Crying like a baby!" Grate would jeer, if he saw Jeff do that.

Then he saw the sheriff. A gray-haired hombre with a drooping mustache, the lawdog was. He came out of his office, climbed on a big sorrel and trotted out of town.

Jeff felt his belly tie up in a knot and his mouth was all of a sudden real dry and hot. He threw a quick glance at the kids in the corral. All they had to worry about was a Saturday night bath. . . .

Jeff Clanton took his hat off and ran his fingers through his hair three or four times. He saw Grate looking at him from the saloon across the street. Pretty soon Grate strolled over. Then Eb came up the street from another direction; Puff Mooney and the rest showed up. . . .

"Git the horses," Grate said as he passed Jeff. "Back door. Git!"

Jeff went along the alley to where six horses were tethered. He gathered up the reins and led them back up the alley. He tried to keep his mind off what was going on inside the bank, but he couldn't. Eb Clanton was crazy with a gun. Eb might—

The muffled roar of a shot cut his thoughts off. He jerked on the reins, dragging the horses along faster. Another shot, then hoarse yells drifted from the bank. Grate came through the back door, carrying two bulging sacks. A racketing blast of gunfire rolled through the door. Puff Mooney came running, then the rest of them. Eb Clanton was last. Eb's guns were out; and smoke dribbled from the muzzles. He yelled a curse, turned and slammed a couple of shots into the bank.

"C'mon," Grate yelled, "save some of that lead for the main street!"

The six of them swept out of the alley. Grate's high-pitched Comanche yell rolled along the main street. People darted into buildings; reappeared a moment later with guns. A rifle cracked. Shotgun blasts shook the street. The sleepy little cowtown was coming awake with vengeance.

"Pour it to 'em!" Grate Clanton roared. "Clear the streets!"

Jeff could see Eb standing up in his stirrups. Eb's two guns were flaming. Grate had the sacks cuddled in one arm. With his free hand he was thumbing his Colt. The guns of the others were blazing. Jeff rode low in the

saddle, the new rifle Grate had given him still in its scabbard.

Jeff saw a man go down, and two more duck inside a building. The firing from the street died down, and the six riders swept out of town, guns still flaming red.

TWO hours later, Grate called a halt to let their horses blow. He stuffed the two sacks in his saddle bags while Frank Clanton rode to a hilltop to take a look back.

"Not a soul in sight," Frank reported.

Grate guffawed. "Bet they ain't even started yet! But ain't no use crowding our luck. We'll make it to the hills before we stop again."

Jeff felt a little sick. He was wondering what had happened back there in the bank. Eb was a dead shot, and crazy with a gun in his fist. Maybe one of them playing kids had a Paw who worked in that bank. He was glad when Grate started again, and he could drop back to the end of the line.

"Hey, look, one rider follering us," Grate said. They were high in the hills now, and far below them, a lone streak of dust lifted along their trail.

"The rest of you ride on," Eb said. "I'll stay here and handle—"

"Naw, wait a minute," Grate snapped. He turned his eyes on Jeff. They were funny eyes. Green, almost. And unblinking, sorta like a snake's. The way Grate looked at him, sweat popped out all over Jeff and made his body itch. He wanted to squirm around and get away from Grate.

"I gotta better idea," Grate said, and kneeed his mount closer to Jeff. His voice was soft. "Whyn't you use that rifle I give you while back? 'Nother gun woulda done a lotta good when we rode outta town."

"Fergot to," Jeff said, letting his eyes drop.

"Fergot, hell!" Grate bawled. "You're jest a yaller-livered skunk, that's all! Here I've took all the trouble to bring you up—and today when you coulda helped us out of a tight, you wouldn't even lay a finger on that rifle!"

Jeff opened his mouth to speak. He felt like telling Grate that he didn't want to be an outlaw; that he wanted to live like them kids in town—even go to school and git some learning. But he didn't say anything. Grate was against the law and all it stood for. So were Eb and Frank Clanton, and they had their hands on their guns right now. No, Jeff knew better than to say what was in his mind.

Grate jerked his head toward the rider following along their trail down there. His scraggly whiskers cracked in a grin.

"I'm leaving that little chore to you," he chuckled. "You make sure that lawdog don't go further than right here!" He wheeled up the trail. "We'll see you at camp—and don't come in till you've finished the job!"

There was an ugly sound to Grat's words, and he swung his short quirt suggestively. The skin of Jeff's back crawled with the memory of that quirt. He nodded, knowing that if he tried to speak, his voice would wobble and squeak like a baby's.

He watched them up the trail, then dismounted and led his horse behind an outcropping of boulders. Feeling sick, he jerked the rifle from the scabbard and moved a little way down the trail. He wasn't going to have a long wait. The rider was coming fast. Already, he had left the rolling plains of the valley and was moving up the mountain trail.

Jeff was remembering the gray-haired sheriff as he had looked when he stepped out of his office and rode out of town. He hadn't seemed like the kind of a man that Grat said all lawmen were. This hombre had looked—well, nice. Jeff felt all hollow inside at the thought of shooting anybody. But he remembered Grat's quirt, too.

He looked down the trail. Every now and then he caught a glimpse of the rider as he wound around the narrow, twisting trail. The man drew nearer and Jeff gave a long sigh of relief. This was not the sheriff he'd seen in town. Jeff figured he must be a deputy, for this hombre wore a badge, all right. And with each passing moment, he drew closer.

He raised the rifle to his shoulder. The front sight blurred. If he pulled the trigger he might's well kiss good-by to ever living in a real town, like law-abiding citizens. He'd be just like Grat and Eb and the rest of them after that. . . . Then he remembered the feel of Grat's quirt on the bare skin of his back. He squinted down the barrel and squeezed the trigger.

The rider gave a hoarse yell and went tumbling out of the saddle. The horse reared once, squealed and went down. Jeff ran down the trail, dry sobs jerking at his throat.

"Don't get up, mister!"

The man on the ground froze, his hand stopping halfway to the .45 Colt that lay in the dust nearby. His back was to Jeff.

"Jist lay still," Jeff said. "Jist like you was dead." He worked the lever of the rifle and stepped cautiously around the man, to kick his gun out of reach. He could see the man's face now. He wasn't old, like the sheriff, but middle-aged; and his face had a hard look to it, sorta like Eb Clanton's. His eyes were black and mean as he glared at Jeff.

But Jeff wasn't thinking about that now. He was just glad the man wasn't dead; and that the hard knot had gone out of his stomach.

"I oughta take the price of that horse outta your hide, you whelp!" the man snarled. "You mighta killed me!"

Jeff glanced up the trail. 'Way up there, a solitary rider was watching them. Grat.

While Jeff stared back at him, he disappeared around a bend in the trail.

"You're lucky you ain't dead—stead of the horse," Jeff retorted, trying to stomp down the quaver in his voice. "I—I just couldn't do it, mister—so I dropped my sight just as I pulled the trigger."

"Wha-a-at?" the man's jaw sagged. "You were aiming at me?"

"I—uh—well, yeah," Jeff said. "But it wasn't my idea, mister. Honest. I—Grat made me do it."

"Grat Clanton?"

Jeff nodded. "Grat was sore 'cause I didn't bust a cap today when we rode out of town. He thinks I'm yellow." He paused. "But I ain't, mister. I ain't yellow. I just want to live like other folks, and not always be on the dodge."

"Sure, sure, kid. I understand."

"Then quit trying to reach that gun! Don't get me wrong," Jeff's voice hardened. "Just 'cause I didn't put a bullet in your brisket, ain't no sign I'm letting you take me in. I ain't done nothing wrong—'cept live with Grat and I couldn't help that."

"Why, kid," the man's voice was persuasive, "I wasn't thinking of taking you in. If you want to live in town—then just ride in—I could fix you up with a job."

"Huh?" It was the first time in Jeff's life anybody had offered to do anything for him. "You—you mean it, mister?"

The man laughed, a short bark. "Why sure, kid," he said. He got to his feet, clapped Jeff on the shoulder, then stepped over and picked up his gun. He shoved it in his holster. "You got nothing to worry about from me, kid. You Grat Clanton's boy?"

"I don't know whose boy I am," Jeff said. "Grat raised me." Jeff suddenly felt happy, so he told the deputy all about living with Grat; how he'd been wanting to get away and get himself a job. He told him how Grat had made him stay behind to shoot the deputy with the rifle Grat had given him.

"Hell, kid!" the man exploded. "That was a dirty trick for Grat to pull on you. Tell you what you do, kid. You come on back to town with me—ain't no use you even going back to Grat's camp."

"Gee!" was all that Jeff could say.

ALL the way to town he nearly talked Deputy Amos Greer's ear off. Jeff told him how he hoped to get a job and live with law-abiding folks, and not have to dodge every lawman he saw. Hoped to git him some learning, he told Greer, and save his money when he got a job, so maybe he could own a spread of his own some day.

The deputy listened half attentively and grunted once in a while, but Jeff was too

happy to notice. He was going to be a citizen! It was dark when they rode in, and the corral was empty. Jeff had sorta hoped the other kids would still be playing, but then, that was a little too much to hope for. There were a lot more days coming!

They stopped in front of the saloon where Grate had been drinking that day. The deputy led him straight through the saloon and into a room in the back. A couple of men followed them into the room. They eyed Jeff coldly.

"The posse got back an hour ago," one of them said. "We never could find you." He jerked his head toward Jeff. "Who's this?"

Jeff perked up. Greer was going to tell these men that Jeff was a law-abiding fellow who wanted a job; maybe he'd even put in a good word for him. Greer hooked a chair with his spur and pulled it to him.

"Grate Clanton's brat," was all that Greer said. "Is the old man back yet?" Jeff figured that must be the sheriff.

"Nope. Somebody rode after him and told him about the robbery. He just took the trail from there—didn't come back to town."

Amos Greer snorted. "Going after the whole gang by himself, huh? Guess he thinks he's still hell on wheels."

"Reckon the town does, too," the man replied. "They keep reelecting him."

"They won't this time," Greer snorted, "when he fails to bring the Clantons in, and I do bring them in!" He fastened his eyes on Jeff. It made him feel uncomfortable, like it did when Grate looked at him. "Here's our ticket—straight to the Clanton hideout!"

Jeff swallowed. "What you talking about, Greer?"

There was a hint of impatience in Greer's voice as he leaned across the table. "You want to be a law-abiding citizen, don't you?" Jeff nodded. "You want to do the right thing, so's you won't have to dodge every lawman you see, don't you?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Well, all right," Greer continued. "Then you got to string along with the law, kid. And stringing along with the law means helping them bring Grate and his outfit in."

Jeff thought that over, squirming nervously, conscious that all eyes in the room were upon him.

"You told me yourself you were sick and tired of Grate and his ways," Greer said angrily.

"That's right, I did," Jeff said slowly. "But—well—Grate brung me up—took me in when I'd of starved to death—" He shook his head. "I don't owe Grate nothing good, but I don't reckon I owe him anything bad, either."

"Yeah? Well, you owe the law something."

Jeff shook his head stubbornly. "Don't guess I do. Law never done nothing for me."

Greer's fist smashed down on the table. "I'm through arguing. Git the horses ready, boys. C'mon, kid." The men in the room hesitated. One hombre frowned and started to speak, then changed his mind.

Jeff scrooched further down in his chair, gripped it with his hands. "Ain't going. I didn't make no bargain like that with you."

"Bargain!" Greer snarled. "Think I'd make a bargain with the likes of you? You'll do as you're told, savvy?"

"Don't reckon I will," Jeff said.

"Get me a razor strop," Greer told one of the men. The man hesitated, looking at Jeff expectantly.

"I won't do no good," Jeff said through stiff lips. "Can't hurt no worse than Grate's quirt."

Greer leaned across the table. "Ever hear of reform school?"

Jeff whitened. He had—plenty! Eb Clanton had been in one for almost a year. Jeff still remembered vividly the wild ride that night Grate helped Eb escape, and the tales that Eb told about the treatment he got. His jaw tightened. He could stand anything Eb could, and Eb had stood it almost a year. Yeah, he could take as much as Eb, more maybe. Grate had seen to that.

"You ain't scaring me, mister," he told Greer. "Grate's the only fam'ly I ever had. I'd like to beat the stuffing outta him with my fists—aim to if I git the chance—but I ain't turning skunk, law or no law!"

"After you git outta reform school, kid," Greer said, "no honest man will want to hire you—you'll wear the convict brand. Won't nobody trust you."

Jeff gripped the chair till it hurt his fingers. He wanted to tell this law hombre that he wasn't scaring Jeff Clanton, but somehow the words stuck in his throat. He wanted to tell him that he might hate Grate and the way Grate made him live, but he wasn't going to turn skunk and trick Grate into the hands of the law. He wanted to tell Greer a lot of things, but the words wouldn't come. He couldn't say a word.

"Git the horses, boys," Amos Greer said.

IT WAS dark when the posse swept out of town. Amos Greer led the way. He set a swift pace across the valley and up the trail to where his dead horse lay. Jeff rode in stunned silence between two members of the posse. His mind had stopped working and he handled the rein mechanically. Greer called a halt beside the dead horse.

"Git in front," he told Jeff. "When the trail widens enough for two horses, I'll ride with you."

Jeff didn't reply, just kned his horse into the lead. He thought wildly of clapping spurs to his mount and trying to get away. But

escape was impossible, he knew. The trail was steep and twisting, and it worked a horse plenty to negotiate it at a walk. The stars were brilliant, giving enough light for short range shooting. Greer had as good as called him an outlaw when he mentioned reform school; he wouldn't hesitate to shoot if he tried to make a break.

At the crest of the mountain, Jeff left the trail, cutting sharply to the right. There was a swift flurry of hoofs, and Greer was right alongside.

"How much farther?"

"Not far." He glanced sideways at Greer. "What'll they do with Grati—when they get him?"

Greer shrugged. "Hang 'em all, I guess. Why? You got nothing to worry about. We'll forget your stubbornness."

Yeah, nothing to worry about, with Grati gone. Jeff had seen a man hanged once. He hadn't known a man's neck could stretch that much. And the way he danced and jerked. He shut his lips tight and wondered how Grati would look. He wondered if a fellow could forget something like that after a while. It had been a long time since he'd seen that man hanged but he still remembered it like it was yesterday. Suppose it took that long to forget Grati's hanging? Suppose he never forgot it?

"How much farther?" Greer was riding close to him now. The stock of Greer's rifle in its scabbard was digging into Jeff's legs. He could hear the man's heavy breathing.

"Not far." Jeff was peering to the right of the trail, leaning forward in the saddle, scanning the brush. He heard Greer's breath quicken as Greer followed his gaze.

Jeff jerked the rifle from the scabbard, neck-reined his mount to the left and jabbed viciously with his spurs. The horse snorted and plunged.

"Hey—dammit—" Greer's startled yell followed him. A six-gun blared, then Jeff was plunging through the heavy brush. He guided his horse toward a small opening in the brush, then along a dim trail. The trail disappeared around an outcropping of boulders. Jeff flung one leg over the saddle and slid to the ground as his horse plunged through the opening. He hit the ground solidly, rolled over on his belly, rifle against his shoulder. He sent a shot whistling through the brush toward the posse, then lifted his voice.

"Grati!" he yelled. "The law, Grati, the law! Make a run for it—I'll hold 'em till you get a start—"

He could hear Greer cursing back in the brush as the posse retreated. He slammed a couple of shots after them, and was satisfied when their retreat became faster. He scrambled to his feet, ran up the trail into the small clearing.

"Grati!" He was almost sobbing now. "It was all my fault, Grati—I didn't mean to—I didn't wanta go to reform school— Hey, Grati. . . ."

HIS voice trailed off into stunned silence. There was the campfire, all right. And back in the shadows, were the horses. One man sat by the campfire. Three still, blanket-covered figures lay there behind him.

"Howdy, son," the gray-haired sheriff said.

"Grati?" Jeff said. "Did—"

"Was he your Paw, son?"

"Not exactly," Jeff said, awkwardly. For the first time he noticed that the sheriff was wounded. He was wearing three crude bandages. "Kin I help—" He stopped, his lips tightening. This man was the law. Grati had been right about the law! To hell with it! It was dirty, rotten—oh, Grati had been right, all right!

"Hey!" Jeff and the lawman whirled.

One of the possemen had sneaked through the narrow pass. He yelled to the rest of the posse and a moment later the little clearing was filled with me. Amos Greer strode over to one of the blanketed figures and flung the blanket back with the toe of his boot. His face was red when he turned to the sheriff.

"Got 'em all, huh? You were lucky."

"Yeah, Amos," the sheriff nodded and repeated in his quiet voice, "I was lucky."

Greer turned to Jeff. He hit Jeff with the flat of his hand and Jeff went sprawling. "You whelp!" he snarled. "Reform school's the place for you!"

Jeff sat there on the ground and rubbed the side of his face. Hot tears welled up in his eyes. Grati had been right about the law! When he got out of reform school, he'd get himself a gun—

"Son," the sheriff said, "come over here."

Jeff got to his feet. Amos Greer backed away, looking at Jeff sort of funny. The sheriff motioned to the saddle beside him, and Jeff sat down.

"Wanta be a good law-abiding citizen, huh?" the sheriff asked.

"Dunno," Jeff said surlily. "Don't think I'd make a good citizen. Don't reckon I'm skunk enough to do what the law wants a fellow to do."

The sheriff looked hard at Amos Greer, then back at Jeff. "Nope, think you're wrong, son. Don't think any reform school is necessary. Believe you'll make a good citizen. You done exactly what the laws wants you to do—you played it straight."

Jeff looked into the calm eyes of the lawman. Straight in there, back of the gray shine was a promise of the kind of life he'd always dreamed about—and had now found.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 79)

How's your knowledge of Western things in general? Below are listed twenty questions—all dealing with wildwest topics. If you call the turn on eighteen or more of them, you can amble up to the boys perched on practically any western corral fence and say, "Move over!" If you can answer sixteen or seventeen, then you're pretty good. If fifteen . . . well, you're still not exactly in the tenderfoot class. Best of luck pardner . . . and keep your aim straight!

1. In the old days cowpunchers riding the range hailed or greeted each other in a characteristic manner when passing. What sort of greeting was usually given?

2. What was an old-time Texan named "Fabens McCord"—no relation to the author—famous for?

3. What was the cowpuncher's word for the slang term "pillow chaser"?

4. Match up the following locations with the appropriate states:

Buffalo Bill's grave	Arizona
Squaw Peak	Colorado
Giant Joshua Monument	California

5. How would you write out, in cowpuncher fashion, a brand described as the "Lazy Edie"?

6. In the old days there existed a ceremony in which a cowpuncher was thrown into the ranch watering trough. What would be the circumstances?

7. Natural fireworks in the form of a flaming pillar are made by setting fire to what desert plant?

8. If, while bunking out on the prairie, you were informed one evening that there was "a lost soul in camp," you would: Ride hell bent for leather for the sheriff's office? Reach for the nearest six-gun? Hunt him up and ask how the ore was running?

9. Which of the following western individuals would be most likely to wear which of the following articles of clothing?

Mexican vaquero	Wooley chaps
-----------------	--------------

Northwestern cowpuncher Red sash

Puncher in "formal" dress Two six-guns

Dude

Flat-topped Stetson

10. True or false? Camelback Mountain near Phoenix, Ariz., is known for a natural rock formation that resembles a monk.

11. What is the reason for the "grooves" inside the barrel of a puncher's revolver?

12. Why would one hesitate to take a blind cow along on a cattle drive?

13. If a westerner referred to a man or an animal as being "silver-shod," what would you think he meant?

14. The word "lick" has two slang meanings in the language of the cowboy. Choose the correct words from the following: Syrup. Whiskey. Chewing tobacco. Animal salt.

15. A typical old-time fort found in southwestern United States would be made of: Wood? Iron? Adobe? Madero? Stone?

16. True or false? Two well known western trails are the "Chisum" and "Chisholm."

17. True or false? In certain states it was once illegal for the new owner of cattle to obliterate the earmark of the old owner.

18. What is the difference between a "fast brand" and a "slow brand"?

19. If while meandering through a western town you were introduced to a "lightning Jim" you would: Try to beat him to the draw? Turn down his invitation to poker? Ask for the job of shoeing his horse?

20. Can a seasoned Westerner read every livestock brand correctly on sight?



CHAPTER ONE

New Land

WESTWARD THE FREEDOM

A giant from over the seas—a terror-on-wheels riding Westward—that was John Grant, until he found a land great enough to hold him—and a girl who could shoot her way into a man's heart!

THE boat was large and the people exciting and the muddy river was new to the eyes of John Grant. He stayed forward for hours, listening to the chant of the pilot's man, "Mark twain!" and the babble of the people behind him through which, like a ritualistic symbol, ran the magic syllables "Oregon!"

John turned at last and went among the crowd of passengers. He was a giant of a youth, almost six and a half feet tall, with bulking shoulders threatening his linsey jacket, with hands still showing traces of Pittsburgh coal dust, and with mild blue eyes and broad, smiling mouth. He was long from Newcastle-on-Tyne but fresh from the striking mines of Pennsylvania and in him there was a hunger for a freedom which had somehow escaped him and which sent him journeying westward.

There was a handsome, slim lad on deck, dressed in linen of purest white, black broadcloth and shiny boots and John envied the slender, graceful, white hands. This was the son of Congressman Reese of Ohio, John knew, home from an Eastern diplomatic post, wealthy, carefree and happy. Will Reese had



The charge lifted horses and men.

never known the pitch-like blackness of the mines, the bone labor, the cave-ins which had killed John's brother and uncles, the bullying of superintendents and foremen. . . .

Yet the dark eyes of the young wastrel flashed above the heads of the sycophants who rallied about him and met the mild blue ones of the British immigrant and paused, examining, sharpening, then smiling. The curly head nodded and John found himself grinning widely at the good looking young man so different from his ungainly, uncouth self.

It was America and he need not doff his cap—this meant so much to John that he moved away, fearful of spoiling the moment.

He examined the wagons loaded upon the upper deck for the Santa Fe trade. He went down and looked over the mules and horses of the Morrow family, and these were closer to his desire—being destined for Oregon.

On deck again, he saw the famed Morrows of Kentucky, Cap and Grace and their daughter, Nancy. Mother and father were stalwart people, with heads borne high, and Nancy was a beauty known from the Mississippi to the Atlantic, with deep auburn hair coiled about her small head and hazel eyes which looked through a man rather than at him. She was proud and wilful and not to John's taste—but she was all of beauty and things that America

By WILLIAM R. COX

promised and which John had not yet tasted. He stood, humble, but towering above the others, looking on.

There was a motley crew about Will Reese. A voice beside John muttered, "Will better be careful of that Juggler Paxton!"

John looked down at grizzled Cap Morrow. The two women stood against the piled baggage, serene, while the planter elbowed and craned and said plaintively, "I can't see 'em all. Is there a fat-faced dandy and a slinky, little man along with Juggler?"

John gravely sorted them out. There were bucks and dudes and the pock-marked big man who was Paxton. He looked at the others and said, "Aye, sir."

"Fancy Dick Doe and Deke Daniel!" spat Morrow. "A trio to cut a throat or sell out a nation. They've been dealin' with the dons and came out on top. Now it'll be Indians, Hudson's Bay Company—anyone who will pay them to prey upon the emigrants."

John said, "Oh?" with rising inflection, watching Will Reese among these men, going toward the saloon.

"And Will Reese'll lose his pocketbook to them at poker!" snapped Morrow. "The country's goin' to the dogs, literally! That's why I'm for the West, young man!" He stared up, a medium-sized bulldog of a man with snapping black eyes.

John said, struggling with his diffidence, "I'm for Oregon myself, sir." He laughed deprecatorily, "Though I've no means for gettin' there."

Cap Morrow's eyes hooded, his lips pursed beneath the mustache. He said abruptly, "Give me your name and call upon me at Westport. A man of your brawn can make the trip with me!"

John's heart leaped into his mouth and he could scarcely stammer his name and his thanks, but Cap Morrow only nodded and walked briskly back to his womenfolks. John wandered railward in a daze. He stood, clenching the wood in his great paws, trying to believe that he had been chosen by rich and famous Cap Morrow to make the journey westward.

HE TURNED and drifted to the door of the saloon, his veins humming with excitement. He heard the laughter within and espied the round table at which sat Will Reese. Again the dark eyes sought him, held him almost with command.

But in the next moment Will Reese was laughing on too shrill a note and tossing coins to the center of the table. There was recklessness in his every motion and he seemed quite drunk.

Juggler Paxton loomed beside Will. Two nondescript river gamblers were in between

the pockmarked man and the pair whom Cap Morrow had named. Deke Daniel was like a dangerous mouse, his nose wrinkling, his beady eyes prying about the company. Fancy Dick Doe was dressed in gray; very flashy, quite stout, with the face of a malcontent baby.

There was a pile of money on the table. Will Reese shouted, "I'll raise," and that meant putting in even more coin, John saw. Juggler outdid the Congressman's son, and there was excitement, then a stillness.

Towering above the watchers, John could see it all. His vision was keener than most people's, and something in this game was wrong, he knew. He had within him the keenest of intuitions regarding his fellow men, sharpened by his desire to be quit of the loneliness which rode him, broadened by his harsh existence among the lowly. He moved forward, understanding nothing of poker, but watchful.

The action focused upon Juggler Paxton, he realized. He saw little Deke make a motion with his right hand as Fancy Dick ejaculated, throwing cards about to draw attention. Juggler exclaimed, "I tap you!"

"Done!" cried Will Reese, pushing forward his remaining money.

John surged forward, brushing aside people who scarcely noted his progress. Juggler was laying down pasteboards. Four of them bore the numeral five in the corner and spectators gasped.

Will Reese laid his cards face down. He said in a voice suddenly cold and hard, "I discarded the five of spades!"

John was at the table. He put his large knuckles upon the board and said clearly, "Is it fair practise for the little man to pass a card beneath the table?"

He kept his eyes upon Juggler, knowing whence would come the danger. Fancy Dick reached within his elegant coat. Juggler's gray eyes went narrow and hard. Will Reese cried, "Get the Captain! I want these men arrested!"

But John's hand brushed backwards, slamming Fancy Dick, knocking him rolling upon the floor, his derringer sliding useless away. Juggler was trying to get loose and draw a revolver of the new type, with its six cylinders which revolved. John's long arm reached out and clamped down, wresting the gun loose.

Deke Daniel had a knife, the kind made popular by Colonel Bowie, and was going under the table. John kicked hard and the near leg splintered and the money rolled on the floor.

Then there was a mob rushing and the Captain, red-faced and choleric, was shouting, "Put them all in irons! Get that disinherited Reese and tie him up!"

Will was wrestling with Juggler upon the floor. John threw a crew member backwards

into the rushing mob. He bent and gathered gold coins, stuffing them into his pockets, fending off attackers. He saw Deke trying to stab Will in the back and calmly kicked the little man ten yards away. He took the broken leg of the table in his hand and began methodically thumping heads. A path cleared magically as the Captain ran for his blunderbuss.

John reached down and slapped Juggler's head against the floor and Will wrenched loose, papers in his hand. He said quite calmly, "They've bought the Captain. Are you with me, friend?"

John picked up more of the money and said, "Aye, sir!"

"Then come on!" cried Will. He dove straight for the door of the saloon. John wielded his club, then threw it and struck the Captain loose from his shotgun. Leisurely he strode after Will and none followed. He saw the Morrrows, saw Cap wave frantically at him to stay. He bawled, "I'll see you at Freeport, sir!"

He saw Will mount the rail, stuffing the papers he had taken from Juggler in an oilskin packet. There was a gay wave of Will's hand toward the girl who stood beside her dauntless mother, then a graceful spring into the air and the muddy Missouri closed over the curling dark hair. John stepped over the rail and prosaically jumped after.

It was wet and nasty but the current was not too swift at this point. A man ran to the rail with a gun, but Cap Morrow growled, "Stop!" and stood firm with two large old-fashioned pistols. Others came and Cap said, "Disowned he might be, but he's Congressman Reese's son. And the other works for me!"

The two men swam and after a while came to shore. They sat upon the bank, wringing themselves out. The young wastrel chuckled and said, "Friend, you've done a good deed."

John thought about this. Then he said, "But I've lost my passage and I must get to Freeport. I've got a job, you see."

Will Reese said, "You shall get there in style. And I am going with you."

They regarded one another and this time Will did not laugh. He extended his hand and its slender grip was amazingly hard and firm.

JOHN GRANT said regretfully, "I'll miss the Morrrows. The big caravan has gone by now." He walked the main street of Westport and men turned to stare at this giant in new buckskins, the revolver he had taken from Juggler Paxton in his belt, a shiny Bowie in his fringed leggin. But the women gazed at his nattier, more dashing companion who was dark as an Indian and handsomer.

Will Reese said soothingly, "We'll catch them, John. We'll have a light rig and can

make better time than they'll be able to make." John said doubtfully, "I don't see how we're going to pack enough goods in that wagon. And they say horses can't make the trip to Oregon. Horses' feet get sore and—"

Will said easily, "You've been listening to the old-timers. You hang around them all the time. Don't you ever have any fun, John?"

The big man sighed. Will was a great one for fun, all right. Every shindig in town saw him kicking his heels to the fiddler's tunes, sparking the girls of the emigrant trains. It was a big year and there were enormous rumors and Texas had been annexed by the United States. Twice John had gone out on hunting expeditions with the ancient riflemen who supplied fresh meat to the town. He had learned much and his great body was strung tight and fit as a drum head.

But Will had stayed in the town. There was something in the boy which kept him where things were lively and gay. Yet John knew that Will was for the West, that he was waiting; that beneath the surface there were things which Will must accomplish. They had come through St. Joe, they had camped on the trail overland since diving from the river boat, they had been together without companions through too many nights for John to underestimate his companion.

He said, "Fun's for later. There's a big country waitin' for us out yonder. I want to make a start in the world, Will—"

Will said sharply, "Step in here!" His grasp moved John from the rude walk, inside a saloon. They stood, peering over the batwing doors as a cavalcade went by. There were three horsemen, several mules, two big, staunch wagons, loaded so that the springs creaked. John stared at the trio who rode in front.

It was Juggler Paxton and his two cohorts, all right. There was no mistaking the pock-marked big man with his wide shoulders, the dapper, fat Fancy Dick, the small, dangerous Deke Daniel. The mules bore swarthy half-breed trail men, hardened workers and riflemen, part Indian, part Spanish, and some of them with Negro blood. It was a small army.

The two stood in absolute silence, watching the caravan file by. When they were gone toward the west, Will said calmly, "Now we can start."

"Oh?" said John.

Will did not pause to buy a drink. He led the way back to their cabin. He sat at a table and drew up a map. He said, "I've got to tell you, John. We're not headed for Oregon, not right now."

John said, "But I want to take up a farm!"

Will said, "You're young—you see here? The Trail is the same as far as Fort Laramie—six miles east of the Fort, to be exact. It is mid-May. . . . It will be the first week in

June before the main party reaches Laramie. If after we catch up, you still want to join the Morrows they will take you along. But first there is a task to perform."

John said slowly, "I know you took papers from Paxton. I know you have some purpose in mind. . . ."

"It is important," said Will. Even now his manner was light, a half smile adorned his features. "It is dangerous. I cannot tell you more. But I need you."

John said, "I had in mind a place with a milk cow and some pigs. I've never plowed. I want dirt under my feet—my own dirt. For hundreds of years my people have been going down into other folks' mines, Will. . . ."

"I know," said his friend. His voice was soft and his dark eyes rested fondly upon John. "You're an American, now, John. Will you make this trip with me?"

John said honestly, "It was your gold which got me here, outfitted me. And I'm your friend, Will. . . ."

"Good!" said the dark youth. "We will start tonight!"

BY MIDNIGHT they had packed the wagon. It was a high-wheeled, strong, but lightweight vehicle. Their two matched teams, one for a spare, were fit and ready. They rode bay animals brought in by the Indians, with a dark streak down their backs showing mustang strain. John said, "But who will drive the wagon?"

Will said, "We'll take turns until Council Grove."

John shook his head, but mounted the seat. They left in utter darkness and went swiftly over the prairie. The morning came and they slept awhile, but Will was in a hurry now, and on they pushed. They passed slower vehicles and at Council Grove they paused.

Will leaped down and was gone, but in a moment he returned, and with him was a tiny, wizened Mexican. He said, "Feliz Gonzales—our driver, cook and aide-de-camp."

The little man showed white teeth, bobbed his head and leaped onto the wagon. Immediately they were off at breakneck speed. John settled into the saddle of his sturdy bay. It was hard going, but he did not complain. Whatever was on Will's mind was driving them, and something told him they would catch the main caravan before Fort Laramie.

After the first day out of Council Grove John lost track. They went so swiftly he scarcely had time to notice the Plains, the rivers, the gorges, Pawnee Rock, the spots of which the oldtimers had told him tales. It was ride, ride, drive, drive, with young Will Reese growing thinner every day and the Mexican seemingly dwindling to dwarf-size.

John never complained, scarcely spoke.

Past Pawnee Rock, they encamped on the Cimarron Crossing and he fell into a sleep like the dead.

It was past midnight when the alarm came. Will's hand shook him and John came awake. The Mexican, Feliz, was hissing, in Spanish. Will said, "They couldn't!"

John felt for his rifle, belted on his revolver. Will said, "Juggler and some of his men have been following us. We'll have to fight."

John said, "So, then, we shall fight!"

He rolled out of his blankets and from under the wagon. There was no sound or sign of enemy. He thought the Mexican was alarmed unnecessarily and was about to say so when a turkey gobbled.

It did not sound quite natural to him. He wheeled, crouching, watching. Something moved near the horses. John leveled his rifle and fired.

There was a wild yell, a rush. Will, at the other side of the wagon, began shooting his revolver. John ran forward, towards the horses, knowing the danger of losing them. He saw Feliz shoot a tall man; then, to his horror, a thrown axe struck the little driver in the head, splitting his skull like a coconut. John roared, forgetting his guns, plunging forward.

He closed with the big man, felt a knife slice at him. He remembered his Bowie and slid it from his legging as he bent the man backwards. He stabbed viciously, threw the body away. He whirled, but the sound of hoofs told him he was too late. He lunged at shadowy figures. He heard Will's cool voice, "They're running, John! But they've put us afoot!"

There were no more enemies. John grunted, bending over the prone figures about small, dead Feliz. Will came and stood silently by his side, looking down. The dead invaders were strangers, but they were hardened, dark men, such as had ridden with Paxton.

Will said, "Poor Felix—he was a patriot. We'll bury him where he fell."

John said, "They didn't get our horses, Will. Look!"

Off to one side stood the two saddle animals. Feliz had removed them from the picket line. The dead little driver had known danger before it struck, John thought. Feliz had done his best to save them. John dug the grave deep, threw the shovel aside. There would be no room for such implements now.

They spent the night selecting jerked beef and flour for their saddle packs, burying what they could of their goods. They backed the wagon under the trees and left a note with their names on it, hoping honest people might refrain from looting it, but expecting little. Then they mounted and went on ahead, in the track of the big caravan of emigrants.

CHAPTER TWO

Pistol-Packin Gal

CAP MORROW had acted peculiarly from the start. He had flatly refused to accept the position of captain of the wagon train. Then he had shirked his duties as one of the older and richer men to keep order in the straggling length of the cavalcade. Miz Morrow was silent, but Nancy was puzzled and said as much.

"Are you ill?" she asked. "You're not the fire eater of old, Father. You're always with your chin on your shoulder."

He said testily, "Go along and spark with that lawyer from New Jersey! Leave me alone."

The lawyer had fascinating sideburns and spoke long involved sentences in which figures of speech rolled about sonorously, but which in the end meant only that he was desirous of putting hands upon the incomparable Nancy Morrow. She listened and held him off with ease.

There were farmer boys who shyly brought her gifts of bacon and eggs and fresh milk, there were longhaired frontier veterans of thirty or so, tanned and hard, who gave amulets and even a dried Sioux scalp. There was a gentle, adoring schoolteacher who just looked. They were all mad about Nancy.

There were delays in the journey. The discipline of the train was bad. Arguments at every crossing of a stream, rash hunters who got lost disobeying orders, greenhorns frightened by friendly Indians who wanted only to beg. Yet Cap Morrow seemed happy at delays, his chin ever turned backwards, his squinted eyes surveying the horizon to the east. Nancy was pleasant but cool to her suitors and Miz Morrow baked a cake when the swollen Cimarron delayed them.

And then the others got across and Cap Morrow deliberately took an extra day. The Jersey lawyer rode his steed back across the stream and begged Cap Morrow to go on, but the Kentuckian said, "Stream's too rugged today. We'll try it tomorra."

That left the Morrrows behind the others. They dallied while Cap fixed a new wagon pole to replace one which was not too badly cracked. He cut his own wood, refusing assistance from the buckskin lads who rode back that day. Then they were alone, and a full day's ride behind and the last straggler had gone. And that was the position they maintained, past the dangerous Ash Hollow, on to Court House Rock and Chimney Rock; taking it easy, never hurrying, always with Cap Morrow looking behind.

They camped in a valley, very pleasant, but lonely. It was May and still cool at night.

Cap banked his fire, made sure Nancy was well covered and took a stroll beyond the wagons, his rifle on his arm.

He saw the first glow of gun fire to the north, from rocks upon the water's edge, and a bullet sailed by his ear. He gave a great shout and knelt, seeking a target.

There were forms dodging; he could not tell how many. This was a thing he had risked, knowing the danger. He gritted his teeth, handling the long rifle he knew so well, which had brought down squirrels at a hundred paces, back in Kentucky, in a good light!

There was a whoop to the east and a charge. He held firm to where he had seen the first savages, knowing Indian ways. He was rewarded when two guns boomed from the wagons and Nancy's voice called, "All right, Father!"

They were coming down the stream and he let them come. When they were close enough he fired the rifle, catching the tall leader in the throat, stifling the death yell. He drew his two revolvers and began blazing away.

They scattered, howling, and he grimly thought that these Indians had never faced repeating guns before. They had spied out a lone pair of wagons, apparently defenseless, and were making a quick sortie for plunder—a thing they dared not risk against the main body of emigrants. He threw the lead at them, changed his position and reloaded.

Nancy came closer and whispered, "Will they come again?"

"Yes," he said. "They know our weakness."

The girl said, "I've loaded four guns and have my revolver. Mother is handling the others."

HE SAID, "Your mother is a Boone, ye know." He strained his eyes, wondering if they dared make a real charge and how many there were in the band. It must be a war party, sulking because the buffalo had been chased from the hunting grounds. He would hate to die here and now—it was not a time for dying. He thought of harnessing the teams and making a run for it. Fortunately he had the animals within the space between the two wagons.

He crept about a great wheel and saw the Indians coming again. He laid down a barrage with the four rifles, checking them. He picked up his revolvers and heard Nancy and his wife firing steadily. These women of Kentucky—he had never doubted how staunch they were; it was one of the reasons he had dared linger behind.

There were too many Arapahoes. They were brave, knowing how few they were

up against. Leaping, yelling, their faces painted like heathen idols, they came down the valley, firing their smooth-bore muskets with little aim, seeking only to get close with tomahawk and knife. Cap coolly picked them off, praying only that they would break before his ammunition ran out.

They yelled more loudly and fiercely. They were not going to stop. He called steadily, "Save a bullet for yourselves, girls!"

Nancy said, "We'll hold them!"

But they couldn't, and Cap knew it. He managed to get cartridges in the Colts, and they were coming on. He stood up, going instinctively forward to meet them.

The firing increased, grew to a volume it had not before attained. Cap snapped an empty gun in the face of a grimacing brave, then ducked and sidestepped an axe-sweep and kicked at the buck's kneecap. Past him floundered a great form, plucking the Indian from the ground, slamming him into the ones behind, then taking a good grip on heels, using the hapless savage for a club, clearing a space.

A lean man crouched, snapping two guns. Nancy cried, "Father! Are you all right! It's help, Father!"

Cap finished reloading his second revolver and said calmly, "About time, too."

The fire leaped up after awhile and John Grant calmly toted dead Indians down the stream and piled them in a heap. There were several bodies, but they had carried away their wounded. When he had finished Will was at the fire, talking earnestly to Cap Morrow. They seemed to know each other mighty well, which was a great surprise to John. He politely tried not to overhear and the tall girl with the red hair came and offered him some, pan bread and said, "Back home I have seen great wrestlers and men who could leap many yards and giants who threw large stones. But I never saw a man such as you."

John said, "Oh?" with his British inflection, embarrassed beyond words. His hands and feet were suddenly too large and he edged out of the light of the campfire so that she would not see how filthy he was. It had been a terrible trip, scarcely stopping for food to keep up their strength, tearing up hill and down in their effort to catch the wagon train.

He ate gladly, licking the crumbs. The girl stood silent, watching him. She said, "You have the bluest eyes I ever saw. That's very English, of course."

John said, "Aye, miss," and choked on the bread.

She said, "Will says you are the strongest and bravest man in the world—I've known Will forever, you know. We're both descended from the Boones."

"Dan'l Boone?" said John, wide-eyed.

"He has hundreds of descendants on the frontier," she smiled. "I'm very tired. Could we sit down? It's been lonely away from the others."

John said, "If you will pardon me, Miss. I'm very—er—I'm not clean!"

HE RAN away and went upstream, past the heap of dead Indians. He stripped and lay in the water, swimming, letting the coolness calm his pounding pulses. He found sand at the edge of the rivulet and scrubbed himself. He re-dressed and went cautiously back and was relieved that the women were wrapped quietly in blankets within the wagons. The red-haired girl did strange things to him. He was, truthfully, frightened of the way she looked at him with her hazel eyes.

Cap Morrow was saying, "You got the proof. It wouldn't do to make it public, o' course—not with a high Army man in it. I'm aimin' for Oregon, Will. I want this over with."

John pricked up his ears. He heard Will say, "They'll be along. I want them to think we're defenseless. You've done your part to make it look that way. John will hide in the wagons, then I'll tool them in."

Cap Morrow said, "It's takin' the law into our own hands, but there are no constables in this country. You're sure about the war?"

Will said solemnly, "It can't miss happening. Polk has messed it up. He tried buying, he tried trading. He might have made it but his agents were clumsy. Mexico doesn't dare sell the territory now. It must be war."

"Old Sant' Anna agin," muttered Cap. "Fuss and Feathers and Rough and Ready agin Sant' Anna. We might get a supprize, Will!"

John was getting drowsy. He rolled up in his blanket and heard Will say, "We've got soldiers down that way, too. Colonel Jeff Davis and Colonel R. E. Lee—West Point men. They're young and have brains. Scott and Taylor will win despite themselves—but we've got to stop the uprising here."

It was not wholly clear to John. The United States was going to war with Mexico over the land north and west of Texas—including California. That made sense. Any Englishman knew what it meant to fight for empire. . . .

But what had that to do with Will Reese, cast-off son of a Congressman? John sat bolt upright and stared at the two men hunkered down beside the fire. Why, Will wasn't an outcast at all! Cap Morrow wouldn't be fraternizing with a black sheep member of a good family, not with such complete agreement and on such familiar terms. This was some-

thing deep and mysterious, more so than John had dreamed.

He shook his head and lay down again. It was too much to think about tonight, when he was so sleepy; there had been so much behind him, from the day on the boat when he had met the dark, merry eyes of his friend, that he would have to spend a day adding it all up. It was not that he was stupid—he was just methodical and sure of himself when he did arrive at a decision.

Meantime—there was sleep.

LYING on top of the stores within the wagon driven by Nancy, John complained, "But this is not the Santa Fe Trail."

"We are going into Fort Bernard," she said patiently. "That is where the New Mexico traders come north to do business with the emigrants. The Santa Fe Trail is guarded by United States troops. Paxton wouldn't dare show himself there, so he will come this way and meet his men at Bernard."

"You mean he is pretending to be going to Oregon?" asked John. The sun beat down on the Conestoga and he wiped sweat from his brow. He hated riding inside the wagon, but they had insisted, and Nancy had taken it for granted that he would keep her company. She had tried to explain things, but all she knew was that Paxton was some kind of traitor, that he was engaged in drumming up strife among the New Mexicans and that Will was determined to stop him.

"Yes, and he knows Will stole his papers on the boat," said Nancy. "He knows Will is the only one who has real knowledge of his plans. He will attack us and try to kill Will before he goes through with it."

John said, "His wagons must be loaded with weapons and ammunition, then, for the insurgents." He pondered a moment, then said triumphantly, "And if we stayed with the big wagon train, Paxton would skulk around and miss us and get to the Spaniards. We've got to flush him like a partridge in order to stop him!"

Nancy said, "You do catch on after awhile. I always said the British were not so dumb!" He looked so stiffly crestfallen that she laughed and added gently, "We shall see many British and Scots in Oregon, and live with them, too. They are fine people, I know."

But John was silent, thinking about the impending conflict. It was strange that Will and Cap should use the women for bait and expose them to such danger. He could not yet get used to the hardihood of these frontier women. He scarcely remembered his own faded mother, but he could not see her, gun in hand, facing Indians, desperadoes or wild animals upon a lonely prairie. He worried

about Nancy, reckoning the strength of Paxton's small army. That had been a bitter, sullen crew, and only an advance guard of them had killed Feliz and driven off the horses and almost put Will and John afoot and at the mercy of the main body which was coming up.

He saw a lot of things now. He knew why Will had played in the bars of Westport, seeking information about Paxton; why, on the boat, Will had deliberately played cards, hoping to catch Paxton cheating and kill him out of hand. The promptness of Fancy Dick and Deke had prevented that, and only John had saved the day when the Captain proved to have been bribed in advance by Paxton.

John realized dimly that he had been the unwitting force which had checked Paxton so far. He had saved the saddle animals by his stand at the camp when poor Feliz was killed. He had helped chase off the Indians and preserve this seemingly defenseless pair of wagons for the expected attack. He had been very fortunate, he thought humbly, to have had a part in these stirring and far reaching events.

NANCY laughed again and said, "You look like a big, unhappy bear!"

He growled in his throat. She was a strange girl, mocking him one moment, the next upsetting him with sudden flashes of feeling in her hazel eyes. Once her hand had touched his when they both reached for something, and the shock which assailed his senses had been like lightning in suddenness and in force. She too was aware of it, and her sunburned skin had paled slightly as she swayed upon the rocking seat of the wagon.

Yet now she giggled at him.

He said, "I wish they'd come. I wish somethin' would happen to get me outa this wagon!"

"Ah!" she said, affecting great sadness. "Am I such bad company? Am I so unattractive?"

He was unable to play the game. He disdained to answer and pretended to be asleep, envying with all his heart the two men who rode outside, keeping continual watch behind, deliberately loitering. He knew better than to think seriously of this daughter of what practically amounted to American royalty—she was of the blood of Boone, and John knew all about the great Dan'l. Yet Newcastle-on-Tyne seemed fantastically far away, he thought, and Pittsburgh, too, and all that went before his meeting with Will Reese and his plunge into the Missouri.

The trail left the river; Scott's Bluff loomed ahead, but the wagons turned through smooth Marshall's Pass in the rear of the Bluff and ascended the ridge until it met a small spring.

The animals stopped and John drank icy water from a canteen Will brought him. Will said:

"Neither Bernard nor Laramie are Army forts, you know. Bernard is a couple of shacks and Laramie is a trading post. We'll camp near here, on the ridge. I'm looking for a Spanish party—they should not be camping too near Bernard."

"Can I get down and look?" asked John eagerly.

Will grinned at him and said to Nancy, "Your wiles, dear cousin, are without potency."

To John's amazement she said stiffly, "Mind your own business, smarty. He only wants to help."

Will said, "Stay under cover. They've got to see me and think you're lost. Have you the guns ready?"

They had been joggling John's ribs all day. They were all loaded to the brim and he had been uneasy lest one go off by accident and kill Nancy. He hauled at his revolver belt and said, "I wish it would start."

"Patience," said Will. He did not look gay any longer. There were lines about his mouth, John saw with a shock, and his lips were pinched in. A pulse beat steadily in his temple, where the hat brim had shaded his brow from the sun. He looked very young and thin and handsome and John's throat became lumpy and he said hastily,

"Anything you say, Will. You're the boss."

Will nodded. "You're a good friend. Without you I would never have made it. Just be patient . . . I must search out the Spaniards."

He rode away. In a little while they made camp on the ridge, but John stayed within the wagon. They brought him food and the sun went low, and beyond, in the far distance, they could see the peaks of the Rockies. Over there lay Oregon—a far piece, John admitted, but negotiable. There was land to be had for the taking, and a house to build and planting to be done. A man's own home, tax free for the time it took to set things to rights. When this adventure of Will's was over, he would "take his foot in his hand and go"—as the trappers back in Westport used to say . . . John was secretly proud of his Americanisms. . . .

It grew dark on the ridge and Will had not returned. Cap Morrow stirred about, and his wife said soothingly, "Will can take care of himself."

NANCY sat too close to John outside the light of the fire and talked of Kentucky and the balls and routs and country square dances and all the parties she had ever attended. But it was talk to cover her nervousness, he knew—and after awhile he said to her, "I'll look around. He wouldn't mean

for me to be hiding if he was in any danger."

"You're no frontiersman," she fretted. "You can't track or scout. What can he be doing so late?"

John said shrewdly, "Don't worry your heart, Nancy lass. Your handsome cousin will return." He grinned to see her flush. He had been thinking for days that she flirted with him to annoy Will. He did not repine, because, he told himself, he asked nothing. Oregon was in his mind.

He took his rifle and revolver and stalked past Cap Morrow, saying only, "I've got to look." The grizzled veteran did not try to stop him. In a moment or two the night unfolded him and an animal screamed loudly in the hills beyond and then there was the sound of a horse.

He flung himself down, unwilling to be caught out of camp by Will. He breathed a sight of relief and waited.

Then he saw the rider in the starlight and his eyes, grown accustomed to the dark, made out the enormous cantle of a Spanish saddle. The man rode warily and slowly, and he bore a stick upon which was fastened a white rag.

John flattened himself and lay very quiet until the man had called out in a piercing, liquid voice. Cap Morrow answered, "Come in with your hands up, stranger!"

JOHN began crawling. Soon he saw the dark-visaged man in short jacket and slashed bell-bottomed trousers standing very stiffly beside the fire upon which Nancy had thrown a fresh branch. He heard Cap say, "I don't know what yer talkin' about."

"There are certain papers," said the man in precise English. "Will Reese bade me fetch them. I must inform you that Reese is a prisoner of the Independent Spanish Army. He was captured while spying and faces death. The passing of these documents will save his life."

Cap said, "Will never told me about documents."

The tall stranger turned and reached inside his saddlebag. He said impassively, "Perhaps this will refresh your mind."

He opened a handkerchief. John heard Nancy's cry, saw Cap Morrow pale and stiffen. Miz Morrow said harshly, "You've hurt him! You've hurt Will!"

"He protested against removing the ring," said the Spaniard impassively. "The surgeon was forced to remove his finger. I assure you that he has had full attention and is well—minus the ring finger, of course. But next, if the papers are not produced, there may come the necessity of removing—shall we say—one ear?"

More than ever Cap Morrow resembled a bulldog now. He crouched and his hand was

on the pistol at his belt. He growled deep in his throat, "Ye came under a white flag. But ye've violated every law of decency. I could kill you where ye stand, but I want ye to go back. I want ye to tell Jugler Paxton and yer cut-throat army that never a one of you'll see home again. Tell 'em for me—for Cap Morrow! Tell 'em Will Reese knows how to die! And Cap Morrow will avenge him!"

The Spaniard looked significantly at the two women, bowed low and said, "As you say, sir. I will return, in force, since you threaten, and display Reese's next—contribution—to your cause!"

He turned deliberately and mounted the black horse. He looked down at Nancy, twirled the ends of his mustache and rode out of camp. Cap Morrow's hand tightened, then loosed his gun handle. He was trembling and beads of sweat were upon his face. "Torture!" he said. "Their only way of getting things done. Paxton's gone around us and made his contact with them. Poor Will. . . ."

John did not go back to argue with them. He was no plainsman, as Nancy had said. But the starlight was good and he could run, doubling over his huge body, his legs tireless, his big feet padding, lion-like. He could lope across this flat country and never lose the conical hat of the Spaniard against the blue horizon of the deep night.

They had amputated Will's finger! They had dared to torture him, to regain the papers taken from Paxton aboard the river boat! Those slender, brown, capable hands of Will's, to be marred by these cattle from the south—John's ears burned and the hair at the back of his neck stood up. Like a giant mastiff he plodded along in the early night.

CHAPTER THREE

Miner's Fight

SOUTH of Bernard the country was hilly, but there were level plains and the camp of the Spaniards was well chosen. John Grant walked in the stream, edging ever closer. There were a score of tents, perhaps, and one was larger than the others, exactly in the middle of the square. There must be sentries, of course.

He had one advantage to which he clung in his simple but direct mind. They did not, because of Will's insistence, know that he was alive. They probably thought he had fallen in the engagement at the camp when Will's mules had been stampeded, or had abandoned the party enroute. He knew there must be a sentry about, but they would not be expecting attack.

He saw the man at last, walking to and fro with fixed bayonet—a scrawny Mexican sol-

dier. There was a cottonwood tree convenient to rest a rifle against and the man stopped to roll a cornhusk cigarette.

John came from the stream, dripping and careful and silent. He lined the tree upon the man until he was invisible and broke into a trot. A taper flamed and John came around the tree with one great fist poised. The man went down without a sound. With hardly conscious thought, John picked the long bayonet loose from the musket, which he threw in the water. The bayonet felt good in his hand.

He bent his long body and began slipping among the tents, wishing for once that he were smaller, so that he might go unnoticed. There was some sort of light beyond the canvas of the biggest marquee and he edged close, hunching in a shadow, listening.

A smooth voice concluded, "I do not think these people will give in. I suggest an attack upon them."

Paxton's husky accents said, "Kill this man and jump the Morrrows. The girl's a prize in herself!"

The smooth voice said, "The Morrrows are important people. The Americans are not here in force—but they might send an army to avenge the Morrrows. We are four hundred miles from Santa Fe."

"If we don't get money and arms to Santa Fe you won't have a base there," said Paxton energetically. "Kearny's got troops and is on his way."

Fancy Dick Doe said petulantly, "Take the girl and kill the Morrrows."

Deke Daniel spoke in his squeaky mouse voice, "If we bring in the gal, Reese will talk. A hot iron at her eyes and he'll give up the papers."

There was a small pause. Then Paxton said, "Deke's dead right."

"Yes," said the smooth voiced Spaniard. "I am inclined to agree."

John stretched his limbs, considering. He was curiously calm. He had to plan, now, and his mind worked clearly. He could not prevent a cavalry troop, however ragged, from attacking the Morrrows. He could not, single-handed, wipe out this encampment.

Paxton said, "Yank the gag from him. . . . Reese, you heard the plan. Are you gonna give us those papers or have yer gal carved up and burnt?"

Will's voice was deeper than John remembered.

"Go to hell."

Paxton said, "I got a notion to cut off an ear just for the fun of it!"

"No!" said the Spaniard. "Such things are only for a purpose. You indulge yourself, senor! Come, we must attack tonight. Call the bugler!"

THERE was movement inside. John hastily moved to the rear of the tent. He heard the guard placed, he heard the bugle's uncertain note. This was an irregular army, hastily gathered to escort the big wagons and the American traitors to Santa Fe.

The horse troop moved out. Inside the tent Fancy Dick Doe taunted, "The gal will look good with her eyes burnt out! You're a fool, Reese! You're gaining nothing."

Will said, "You—"

There was the sound of a curse, a blow. John moved back, to the front. There were two guards. He grew angry on the sudden and came at them without deception. His size against the starry sky must have stunned them; they stood with opened mouths for a split instant.

John stabbed with the bayonet, leaving it skewered through the body of the first man. The second he caught in his great hands, tearing him from his weapon, scrapping him as he would a sheep.

He stood a moment, head flung back, goaded beyond the limits of his deep patience. There was no sound in the camp.

He bent and slipped within the tent. The light was good and he could see Fancy Dick in the act of tilting a bottle to his lips. It was a long-necked brown bottle and John, moving like a panther, was on the fat man before he could lower it. One hand went behind Fancy Dick's neck. The other tapped the bottle home, ramming it down the thick gullet. Fancy Dick choked once, turned purple and sagged to the earth.

John whirled. Will said, "As neat a way to kill a man as I ever saw, friend."

Will's eyes burned and there was pain—almost fear—in them, but they cleared as John ripped loose the thongs which bound him. His right hand was bandaged.

John said thickly, "The dirty hounds—"

Will said, "I was lucky. They had a surgeon. The Indians don't nurse you when they are finished. John—are there horses?"

John said, "Get your guns. Can you handle them left-handed, Will?"

"Not so well." Will stumbled a little, clutching at John's arm. "They've—done me in a bit. But we've got to go, eh, friend?"

John said, "The horses!" He was running among the tents. A sleepy man got in his way and he slammed home his fist, sending him back into the tent from which he had come. He got to the big wagons which Paxton had brought across the country and rummaged about. He dug through boxes of black powder and brass cartridges, strewing the stuff recklessly until he found what he wanted. He made a bundle and ran back to where Will was somehow managing a pair of horses.

He tightened the cinches and placed his bundle in a capacious saddle bag he found alongside a tent. They mounted and rode into the night.

Will said faintly, "I'll not be much good—if they get those documents, it will go bad for the people in Santa Fe. There's an American colonel involved. It will undermine the confidence of the mountain men. The war is probably begun by now. . . ."

John said, "Ride, Will. Nancy. . . ."

They rode hard. The sudden drumming of gunfire ahead told them that Cap Morrow had not been taken by surprise, that Nancy and her mother were again at the guns. The Boone women . . . John choked, thinking of them. This was America—far from New-castle-on-Tyne. . . .

THEY came down, deploying by mutual consent. Will rode around them, going north of the camp. John sent his horse eastward, then dismounted, bearing the saddle-bag.

He crept over a knoll and stared. The flashes of gunfire below were like fireworks exploding in the night.

He went along, seeking his prey. He saw a man circling on horseback, firing. He leveled his rifle and chanced a long shot. To his gratification the man fell from his horse.

But there were too many of them for sniping. He moved in and saw them gathering for the charge. They would not make the mistake of the Araphoes and die singly without attaining their aim. The tall Spaniard who had come in with the white flag was evidently the leader—a brave man, John knew. He was calling in his men, sending one small party northward for a feint. The main body would swoop from the little vale.

Will was northward, and it would be his part to see to that gang. The others waited, standing beside their horses, an advance party sending shots towards the banked wagons. John crawled up the hill above the waiting band, dragging his parcel.

He heard Will shout something and open fire with his guns. The Morrows were still firing. The leading Spaniard rose in his stirrups and called something and Paxton started forward, little Deke beside him, crying Will's name. John stood, outlined against the stars, calling, "Aye, you fools! You asked for it!"

His arm went back, then out. A slender stick soared through the air, innocently turning, lazy in its flight. It landed among the startled horseman. There was a crushing, resounding detonation and the earth split asunder.

The miner's fingers were attaching another cap, the long arm swung again. The second stick of dynamite seemed to lift horses and

men and send them apart. The third stick was almost drowned by the screams, the blood, the prayers. The tall Spaniard was gone, vanished from the earth.

John was running, carrying his sack, his rifle, his bayonet. He was cluttered with weapons. Paxton and Deke were swerving, their hats gone, their faces livid with fear. John called, "Here's for you, bully boys!" and chucked a stick which fell short.

The explosion made the horses insane with fear, sent them rearing. First Paxton, then Deke were bucked off. They bounced on the ground, seeking their weapons.

He caught Paxton as the pockmarked man raised his revolver. John's hand clamped down and the falling hammer lacerated his flesh. But he plucked Paxton from the ground and wheeled him about in a circle.

Deke, crawling along, aimed a rifle. The shot rang out and John lifted Paxton in a purely defensive gesture. His arms felt the shock of the bullet and Paxton groaned, "He's killed me!"

"Then do you kill him!" said John reassuringly. He raised the sagging, big body and flung it down upon Deke's head. The little man crumpled and John made sure by lifting him by the hair. Deke Daniel's neck was unhinged in satisfactory fashion.

Will was already in the camp. The few remnants of the Independent Army were flying for their lives. Miz Morrow, blackened by powder, was bandaging Cap Morrow's shoulder where a ball had grazed it and Cap was cursing appreciatively. There was no sign of Nancy and John stammered:

"Did they—did she—is she all right?"

Will was leaning against a wagon wheel and in his hand was a packet of oilskin. He said wonderingly, "She had them on her. She was going to give them to Paxton if he got her and try to make a deal for me. . . ."

"They're lyin' out there," Cap said heavily. "We shot them—white men. I never shot white before. . . ."

Will said in his strained voice, "It was dynamite, eh, you old miner?"

John said, "The papers—she saved them."

"These papers," said Will slowly, "will go to Kearny, so that he will know whom he can trust. It's war, John. Dad pretended to kick me out to get the goods on this colonel. Do you understand? I've got to join Kearny. But you—you go on to Oregon."

"Without you?" asked John gravely.

"It must be that way," said Will.

The taut lines of the young man's face softened. He said, "Washington will seem tame after this—" He chuckled and said, "Nancy's up by the water. . . ."

John choked, "But you—Nancy. . . ."

"We're of the Boone blood," nodded Will. "Cousins. Die for each other and all that. Go along, you big ox!"

John went, stumbling, aware of Miz Morrow's steady, approving smile, of Cap's grinning nod. He was, now that he came awake at last, an American upon the frontier of new land. Only seventy years ago there had been a Declaration by the Congress which said he could be free. . . .

He met the girl and her face was still cool, and fresh from the water, soft between his great palms. She said simply,

"Right from the start, John, on the boat. . . ."



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COMANCHE TRAIL



A spring-blade knife showed briefly.

By
**M. HOWARD
LANE**

HE CAME riding into Council Grove this fine spring afternoon just as the sun was dropping in red fury beyond the prairie across which men were turning their eyes and feet this year of '65. Once he had been called Captain McCloud when Lee's army was the pride of the South. But now he was just plain Jeff—Jeff McCloud in faded gray with the shine gone from his tall boots and the stripe from the side of his trouser legs.

The smoke from evening cook fires started to thread its way upward through the hickory and maple and walnut trees that forested this narrow strip where the caravans for Santa Fe and the Overland Trail gathered. McCloud regarded it all with little interest, and let Comstock, his big, dusty cavalry horse, pick his own way through the clutter of wagons parked in each open place.

There was happiness here, and excitement

"We'll play this hand as it should be played, Mr. Tinhorn—deal from the top and—win or lose—I'll shoot to kill!"

seemed to fill the very air with vibrations a man could feel, but Jeff let none of it touch him, for gunsmoke and death were still fresh in his nostrils, and his mind was still too full of memories.

Once in Georgia, before Sherman had marched to the sea, there had been a plantation, and a girl wife who had waved him bravely off to war. Now there were ruins back in Georgia, and a fresh grave in the family plot. He had Comstock, the ragged clothes that he still wore with a certain unconscious grace and dash, the issue Colt oiled and ready for use in a flapless holster at his hip, and some fifty dollars he had won in a poker game in Independence.

Winning that small sum had lifted some of the grayness from his spirits momentarily, but by morning the depression had returned, and he had set Comstock's feet into the road made dusty by the wheels of emigrant wagons heading toward Council Grove and a West beyond the prairies, where life was fresh and new. He had headed that way because each step Comstock took carried him farther away from Georgia and a past that had to be forgotten.

The iron-gutted whanging of a banjo came to him and drew his attention to a slatternly wagon parked in a narrow clearing just to his right. A tall, thin man lounged against the front wheel of the wagon, and one enormous hand lazily brought music from the instrument he was holding. A huge foot that only a handmade shoe could fit, tapped out the time seemingly of its own accord while one galled precariously held a pair of butternut pants and red shirt together. His blue eyes held a merry twinkle and McCloud noticed one thing immediately. In a land where most men wore whiskers, this mountebank was clean-shaven. Jeff McCloud wore no beard himself, only the thinnest of black mustaches which was not the popular thing to do, but he had long since quit caring about what people thought of him.

The mountebank caught Jeff's eyes, and his perpetual smile widened a little.

"Cap'n," he drawled, without a break in the rhythm of his playing, "that's a mighty fine hoss you set. But he looks tired, and so do you. Come and sup with us, Cap'n. Ain't much, but my daughter, Carrie, she makes what there is taste mighty good."

* At the sound of the mountebank's voice, a man came around, obviously from the cook-fire on the wagon's opposite side. At sight of him, Jeff saw the lanky one's grin widen.

"Sam Petras hyar is staying," he drawled. "Me'n Carrie are feeding him up good, because Sam is hand-pickin' a bunch to roll West with his own outfit to Santa Fe, and on along the Kearney Trace to Southern Californy.

And that's whar me'n Carrie want to go. I hear tell they got a city there called Los Angeles where the folks is so rich they toss doubloons around like pennies. If it's true, and they got stages in their saloons, why me'n Carrie will sure entertain 'em. McKay's Minstrels, that's what we used to bill ourselves. Sam's a right proper man to ride West with, and if Carrie's cookin' won't get us an invite to hitch-up and come along, why nothin' will."

The mountebank's drawling talk was only a murmur in his ears, as he let his eyes pass indifferently over the man who had come around the wagon tongue. He was not old, perhaps thirty-five, compactly built, and his bearing was still military. Now a merchant's sleek, black garb clothed him, save for the tall gray beaver hat he wore, slanted down across one thick, sandy brow. Eyes that were the pale gray of granite rock peered out from beneath his brows, and they'd never tell a man what San Petras might be thinking. His mouth was small, almost lost in the curly blondness of his trimmed beard.

"You're a rascal, Bert McKay," Petras said, and his voice held a hint of ready laughter.

McCloud did not like Sam Petras at first glance, but none of his feelings showed on his thin, austere face.

"I thank you," he told the mountebank, "but Comstock must be tended to, and I am not hungry."

"You're lean, Cap'n." Bert McKay seemed to take no affront at the brusque refusal. "You're hungry all right, but I guess it ain't nothin' food will satisfy. If yuh change your mind, come on back after you get that big blue roan of yours bedded for the night. He's a mighty fine horse—"

Jeff rode on past the tailgate of the wagon and looked with faint curiosity toward the cook-fire at the far end of the rickety Conestoga. A girl's blue eyes raised to give him a glance. She was crouched down over a make-shift stove, and her face was sullen, and not pretty. She was a tall, strong girl, and McCloud could not help but notice the roundness of her bare, brown arms, and the fullness of her figure. She made no attempt to speak, and Jeff kept riding, but he carried with him the scent of something she was cooking and it had smelled good. It made him realize that he was ravenous, and the sensation was obscurely encouraging, for this was the first time his bodily needs had made any marked impression on him.

HE CAME at last to the trading post and found a big corral behind the place. A grinning boy stepped up to take Comstock, and his mouth pursed with approval.

"We don't see many hosses fine as this,

Cap'n," he piped: "Don't you worry, he'll get a good rub and a bait of barley afore I bed him down for the night."

Jeff swung down, and he felt the ache a shard of canister had put into one hip. Whenever he was tired that leg bothered him. Limping a little, he started to turn; then thinking of something, he swung back to the boy and gave him a quizzical smile.

"You're the second one who has called me Captain," he observed. "I wear no bars."

"Ner stripes," the youngster grinned again. He looked at the tall man in the tall boots and ragged gray, and at the curling edge of black hair below the band of his cavalry hat, and his lips widened. "Hell, Cap'n," he answered, "a man like you don't need no 'signia!"

Jeff turned away, the smile still on his lips. It was pleasant to talk to people again.

Inside the post there was light and warmth. The spring evenings still brought a remembered chill of winter, and he was glad to stand a moment beside the glowing stove, and draw his impressions of the place.

There was the usual frontier gossip a man might hear from Independence to Santa Fe. Talk of trains that had been attacked by the redskins and of the merits of one route over another. Out of it came one fact that seemed to stand by itself. The Santa Fe Trace and the trail Colonel Kearny had blazed across Arizona to California had come into disfavor.

"Thar's Comanche bands, led by squaw-men and renegade whites who are being supplied with contraband rifles to hit yore wagons when yuh cross the Cimarron," one bearded emigrant was saying. "And 'Paches to pester you all across Arizony. So airy man who's got his hair left by the time he sees the Colorado and Californy will be lucky, say I. If you want my notion of it, Sam Petras needn't be so high and mighty about who trails with him. He'll be lucky to git a dozen wagons together."

Some laughter followed that announcement, and another bearded teamster drawled, "Spike, you know danged well you're just sour because he ain't invited you to go with his company!"

The grumbling talk drifted off, and McCloud turned to a side room where a buffalo steak and beans took the sharp hunger out of him. He left money on the table and drifted back to the main room again, and against the rough bar at its opposite end he recognized the merchant who had been at the mountebank's wagon.

Petras was standing with one black-clad arm over the bar, fingers moving a full whiskey glass round and round with unconscious rhythm. He was watching five men at a poker table, where a game had started since McCloud had gone into the dining room.

Jeff gave the group the edge of his atten-

tion just as one of the players lifted his eyes to Petras. A signal, it seemed, passed between them, and then the player was tossing in his cards and swinging casually as though to rise. By accident, it appeared, he noticed the cavalryman's tall shape, and a smile broke across his lips.

"McCloud," he said, rising. "I didn't know you were coming this way."

Jeff's expression did not change. "I seldom discuss my affairs with chance acquaintances," he said dryly. This was one of the men he had joined for that evening of poker back in Independence. He wore the clothes, and he carried the smoothness about him of a professional gambler. His name, Jeff recalled, was Queen.

"Join us," Queen suggested. "We need another player, and you've got some of my money in your pocket. I'd like a chance to win it back."

"I never refuse a man that opportunity," Jeff answered him, and he had a feeling that Sam Petras had arranged all this.

The game took shape as the evening wore on, money flowing first to one and then another, with none of the stakes riding very high. Jeff watched his hands gradually improve, and his interest kept sharpening in things he could not understand.

Queen was a clever dealer, and whenever the man dealt Jeff knew he could count on winning the hand. The chips before him were gradually piling higher. There was, he estimated, perhaps a hundred dollars or more in front of him now. From the desultory talk about the table, he had learned that the other players were teamsters employed by Petras to drive the four wagons that made up his own outfit. Queen, too, was obviously a Petras man, and it did not seem right that he should be double-crossing his own companions.

There was a way though, for a man to find out about such things. He pushed his chips toward Queen who was the banker, and said in his dry voice, "I've had enough for the evening."

His remark seemed to catch the gambler by surprise. "The night's still a pup!" he exclaimed, and his eyes measured the cavalryman's stack. "One more hand," he urged. "And we should make it a good one."

Jeff nodded, and his austere brown face had not changed expression. "As you wish," he murmured, "but we will play this as it should be played, Mr. Queen." From the oiled holster at his hip, came Jeff's Colt. He laid it beside his hand on the table, and his voice held its softness. "If either *you* or *I* win this hand, Mr. Queen, I shall be forced to shoot you. Deal the cards please, all from the top."

The gambler surged back in his chair, and his well-fed face turned livid. "McCloud, I'll

take that from no man, sir! Are you accusing me of cheating?"

Jeff smiled, and he made the discovery that in moments like this, life took on a sharper meaning, and the past was something he could drop and forget. "No," he said gently, "but the last hand, I've found, is where a man is apt to make his mistakes. Deal the cards, Mr. Queen!"

The pot was small, and one of the teamsters won it, a puzzled expression on his whiskered face. "Funniest game I've ever set in," he complained. "Cash me in, too, Queen."

PETRAS had left the bar, and Jeff took one drink there, and bought himself a cigar. Saving its smoke, he strolled out into the moonlit dark of the camp. Fires were glowing all along the strip, casting their pleasant brightness over family groups. It would be a fine thing for a man to be heading West into a great new empire if he had someone to walk the long way with him, and share equally his hopes of the future. He turned abruptly and went toward a darker section of the camp, beyond which would lie Council Grove Creek where a lonesome man might watch the dark waters and ponder the actions of two men named Sam Petras and Queen.

"You're a mite out of bounds, friend," the voice came startlingly to him as he neared one of the dark wagons. "Sam don't like folks coming around here in the dark. He's got silks for Santa Fe in his wagons, and plows for California. Easy stuff for a man to steal."

His first surprise had vanished. "Particularly the plows!" Jeff said dryly, and headed back for the bright runway down the center of the grove.

A military figure in black was coming rapidly his way. "McCloud," Sam Petras said, "I saw you turn off toward my wagons, and I thought maybe you were looking for me."

"If I had been," Jeff told him, "the reception would have been a chilly one."

"There's always petty thieves in a bunch this size," Petras explained. "I take no chances, McCloud."

"You did tonight." The curiosity in him was enough to force the issue. "Your man, Queen, had his orders to let me win some of your money. Why?"

Sam Petras' laugh came too readily. "You're a smart one, Captain. I knew that the minute I laid my eyes on you, and you're poor. Perhaps I was testing you out. I could use a man with your eyes and experience. Would you like to saddle up and roll West with me? I will pay fifty and found, for a scout."

"I am not a scout," Jeff told him.

Petras did not seem to understand that remark, for he shrugged and was silent a moment, then he said urgently, "McCloud, per-

haps I didn't make myself clear. Your gun is what I want to buy."

Jeff shrugged. "I'm finished with fighting," he said gently.

Petras sighed, "Your choice."

The iron-gutted twanging of McKay's banjo greeted Jeff as he stepped to the edge of their meager after-supper fire. He saw the man's daughter, Carrie, sitting in exhausted resignation with her back to the high front wheel. She made no effort to speak.

Bert McKay took care of that. "Howdy, Cap'n," he greeted, and for once he quit his ceaseless strumming. "Come and set. Sam was hyar, but he left in a hurry."

"I met him," Jeff answered. "He tells me you are trailing West with his party. Is the Santa Fe a wise choice? I hear you can reach California just as quick by following the Overland to Jim Bridger's Fort and driving on across South Pass."

The girl said, "Why concern yourself, Captain?"

Quick temper showed at the corners of the cavalryman's lips. "I am ashamed of my interest," Jeff apologized, and made his slight bow in her direction.

"Don't pay Carrie no heed," McKay said hastily. "Lissen to me, Cap'n, lissen to me—"

But whatever the mountebank had been about to say was cut short by a shout half the length of the camp away, and immediately there were people running from every part of the grove. Jeff found himself swept along with the tide, postled close to someone. He caught a bare, rounded elbow in the dark, and knew it was the mountebank's daughter.

Carrie said shortly, "I'm sorry, Captain."

With an insight that long suffering of his own had given him, Jeff murmured, "It is not pleasant to think of making this trip just to entertain in a Los Angeles saloon."

The girl caught her breath sharply. "No," she said, "it isn't."

STANDING in the firelight, near the ford of Council Grove Creek where the roads West began, were a half dozen men, or the caricatures of them. What clothes they still wore were rags; legs and arms showing through rents were shrunken and thin.

One of them was babbling out their story in a rush of words. "We were headin' home from Santy Fe. The *Comancheros* hit us at this end of the *Jornado del Muerto*. Journey of Death they call it, that trip across the Southern Cimarron. Wa'al it was that for us. We left four of our party behind, dead, and made a run for it on fresh hosses, after nailin' two of 'em devils. The cusses we killed were *whites*! Whites painted to look like Comanches, usin' better rifles than we can buy! They wanted our wagons, and gold, and got

'em, and they'll git yours if you travel the *Jornado!*"

Sam Petras had pushed to the center of the circle. "These men have been through hell," he exclaimed. "We can't let them stand here, folks. Let's adjourn to the post. The drinks'll be on me!"

Jeff's eyes were thoughtful as he said loudly, "Those boys will like to hear music again, McKay. Let's go get that banjo of yours."

"I'll walk with you," Carrie said.

She turned beside the cavalryman, and her free stride was long enough to match his own, he noticed.

The mountebank had a little frown on his leathery face, and his eyes had lost their smile when they paused beside his wagon. "Cap'n," he said, "you ain't the one to worry about the feelin's of other folks. You've got enough of your own troubles."

"I'm beginning to learn," Jeff told him, "that when I concern myself with the problems of others, I forget my own."

"Them pore cusses won't be wantin' music. Drink is all that'll catch their eye!"

"I know that," Jeff told him quietly, "but we have an empty camp, friend, for probably the only time it will ever come. It occurs to me that even Sam Petras' watchdogs might have deserted their posts to see what was happening. Have you ever heard of a trader guarding plows for California, McKay?"

A gusty breath shook the mountebank like a straw in the wind. "Cap'n," he said huskily, "I've been wondering about that myself."

With the banjo an idle murmur in the dark, they once more came to the rear of the trader's wagons. Tight drawstrings pinched the sheeting above the endgate into a slit.

A spring-blade knife showed briefly in one of the mountebank's hands. The canvas whispered as he cut the tight string. Jeff forgot the ache in his hip as he went over the tailgate.

The shadowy shape of packing cases and the dull shine of plow shares on the sorely needed implements were all about him.

He took McKay's knife, and pried at the nails sealing the packing case nearest him. A slat came free, and then another, enough to make room for his arm. Straw touched his hand first, then the slimp feel of grease-coated metal. He drew a repeating carbine from the case. . . .

Outside the wagon the banjo jangled, and a man grunted. Jeff reached the tailgate. Two figures were locked together. He dropped on them, and McKay's knife drew the life dispassionately from one of them.

The man was Queen. Jeff bent and wiped the blade on the other's sleeve, and handed it back to McKay.

"You're a cool one, Cap'n."

"I've had to kill before," Jeff told him.

He turned, and Carrie and her father tramped along behind him. The mountebank's banjo sent a catchy melody out ahead to herald their coming.

THE trader was at the post bar, and so were all the rest of the emigrants who could crowd into the wide, low room. Smoke layered the beams like pearl fog, swirling low about the lanterns.

"Hyar comes the music!" somebody shouted. "Mac can make anybody forget his woes—even you fellers who've been through hell!"

It was a suitable cue for Jeff McCloud. "Can he?" the cavalryman asked, as he laid the greased rifle on top of the bar. Packing case straw still clung to its barrel and stock, and he heard the hoarse cry of one of the emaciated group who had made their long way back to Council Grove. The man's hand came like a talon toward the carbine as Jeff side-stepped to a space that had cleared for him.

His face wore a look of calm that had at last found its way into his heart. His eyes were on Sam Petras as he spoke. "You will find the gambler, Queen, down by Mr. Petras' wagons," he said, "and you will find cases of rifles instead of silks inside them. I have not checked as yet, but if there are any men here carrying wealth they will have been the ones Mr. Petras has approached to join with his outfit."

"By the Lord Harry, that's right!" someone said.

Sam Petras moved now toward the cavalryman.

"Johnny Reb—" his words had all the hate of a conqueror's in them—"Johnny Reb, you're lying—!" His hand was sweeping beneath his coat toward a holstered Colt. Jeff dropped his own hand, but he had forgotten the grease coating his fingers. His hand slipped on the stock. He fumbled a second time, more desperately to grip the curved wood, but he knew that his draw would never be fast enough to match the trader's.

He saw the trader's Colt lifting from leather, and then the flat face of a banjo, swung by its long neck, obscured his view. The banjo's strings jangled once, pitifully, and then Sam Petras was pitching forward toward the floor.

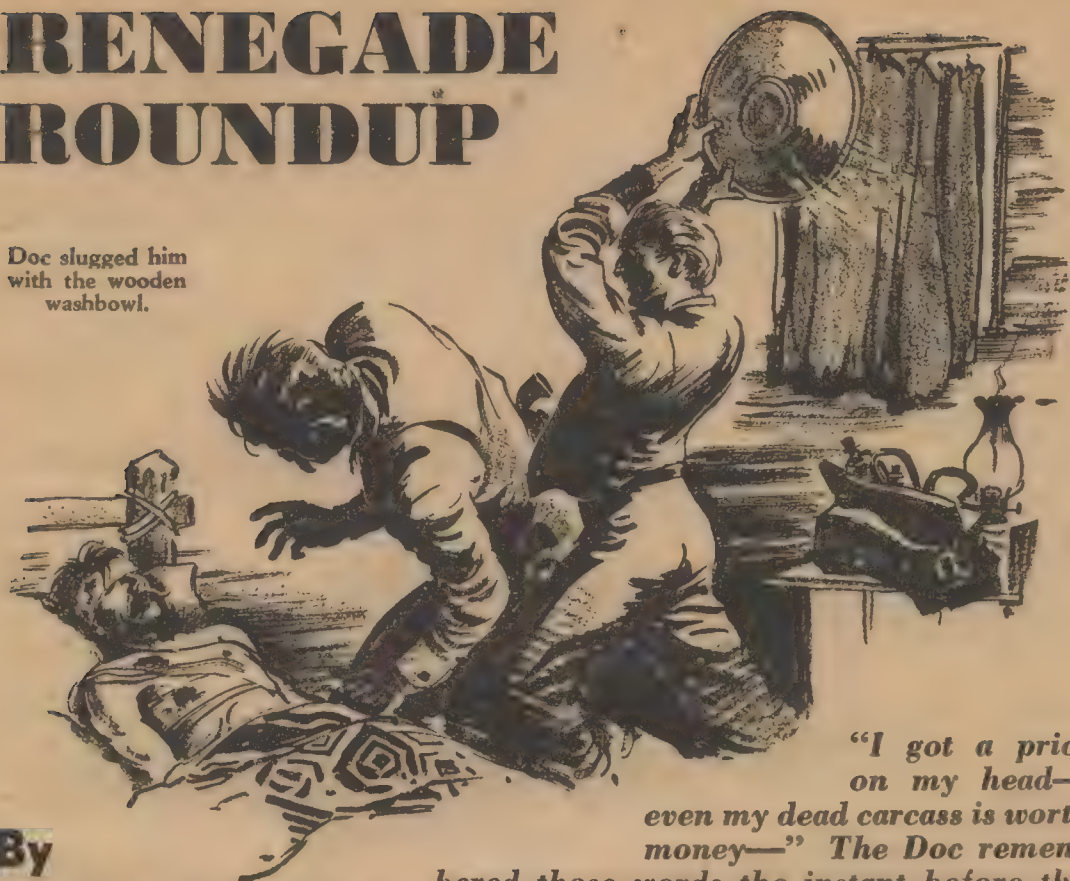
Gangly Bert McKay was looking sadly at the shattered remnants of his instrument. His wide mouth worked a moment; then he seemed to catch hold of his emotions.

"Ain't likely I'll find another this side of Californy," he mourned, "but, Cap'n, 'twas worth it. We'll all be able to sing crossin' South Pass, and that will be somethin', won't it, Captain?"

"Yes," Jeff told him. "Yes!"

RENEGADE ROUNDUP

Doc slugged him
with the wooden
washbowl.



By

LANCE KERMIT

*"I got a price
on my head—
even my dead carcass is worth
money—" The Doc remem-
bered those words the instant before the
owlhoot guns blasted a dreadful answer!*

DOC ANDERSON continued to keep an eye on his patient, but his thoughts were not on the dying man. He was thinking about all the mysteries he could clear up—if he had the chance.

Yep, he knew the answer to a lot of questions now. Questions that had been troubling the folks of Butte Center for a long time. About rustlers, about robberies, and about killings, and why they couldn't be stopped.

"Only," Doc thought, "don't look like I'm going to live long enough."

He stared down into the face of Anthony Hawkes; listened to the man's labored breathing. When Tony went—well, they'd have no further use for Doc.

He cut his gaze around the miserable little outlaw shack, with its gunny-sack windows, its dirt floors and the big cracks showing between the logs. And he cast a sidelong glance at big John Hawkes, the dying man's brother. He was dozing in his chair. Doc shifted his position, gathering himself. . . .

Outside, the rickety barn door slammed shut; a man cursed in a steady, drunken mono-

tone, then the cabin door jerked wide open.

"Cheap rotgut likker—you'd short change yore own mother, Hawkes!" The man in the doorway flung an empty bottle across the cabin. Swaying slightly, thumbs in his gunbelt, he glared with drunken fury at John Hawkes.

The outlaw leader no longer dozed. He shifted slightly in his chair, and there was controlled hatred in his look.

"Not so much noise," he snapped, motioning toward Doc Anderson and the dying man.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot," Slip Marsden grunted, with a trace of a leer, "your dear brother is bad shot up—so bad shot up that me'n Hooker hadda risk our necks going to town after that sawbones."

"The only reason you went is because I wanted to nurse Tony myself till the Doc got here." John Hawkes spoke evenly, but over in the corner, Doc Anderson could feel the tension piling up. And Doc began to hope.

"Some of the other boys been shot up," Slip went on softly. "Nobody risked their necks getting *them* a sawbones. Maybe that's why they croaked."

Doc Anderson watched the muscles along Hawkes' jaw tighten. "You'll find another bottle in my saddlebags," Hawkes told Slip, evenly.

"Hope it ain't that same cheap rotgut you been bringing out," Slip flung over his shoulder as he went out.

John Hawkes got up and came over to the cot. He looked a long time at his dying brother.

"He don't look so good," he said worriedly. "How's he doing?"

Doc shrugged. "Can't say," he lied glibly. John Hawkes stared at him suspiciously, then went back to his chair to wait.

Doc was waiting, too. Waiting for the moment when John Hawkes' attention would be diverted just long enough— He groaned inwardly. Slip Marsden was coming back.

The skinny little outlaw stood in the doorway, the bottle of whiskey dangling in his left hand. His right hand hovered near his gun.

"You're just plain drunk now," John Hawkes snapped angrily. "Why don't you let that stuff alone?"

"What else is there for me to do?" Slip growled. "I ain't a *respected* citizen like you! I can't go to town and strut up the street and have folks point me out as the town's leading bigwig, like you. I got a price on my head—I'm worth money—just my dead carcass is even worth money!"

"So what?" John Hawkes growled.

Slip's eyes narrowed in drunken wariness. "That's just what I'm wondering, Hawkes," he whispered. "There was something else in your saddlebags besides that bottle. This!"

He shook a paper in Hawkes' face. Even in the fading dusk, Doc Anderson could see it was a reward poster with Slip's picture on it. The legend in big print stood out—"\$5,000 Reward."

"Well?" The word came softly from big John Hawkes.

"I've seen you doublecross some of the men that's rode with you," Slip said, "and—five thousand is a lot of money. You'd do anything for money, Hawkes. Anything."

John Hawkes stood up. "You're a fool, Slip, a crazy dam' fool." Doc got ready, but Hawkes was no fool; he'd turned so he could keep an eye on the medico, too. Doc felt his pulse quicken, and his mouth was getting dry and hot. He had a doctor's hunch that Anthony Hawkes had just died, but he wasn't going to look now. He was going to watch for his chance—that chance that had to come soon, or it'd be too late.

"I saw that poster in town—and brought it out to you—thought you'd get a laugh out of it." John Hawkes' voice hardened. "Now get out!"

HE WATCHED Slip leave, then turned and came over to the cot again. Doc waited, standing back a little. When John Hawkes bent over his dead brother, Doc slugged him with the big wooden washbowl.

Hawkes grunted and sagged to his knees. Doc swung again, and the bowl shattered. Hawkes was down, but still struggling feebly. Doc looked around helplessly.

He couldn't risk a commotion—not now. Maybe it would be a few minutes before Hawkes got his senses back. He'd have to chance it. Doc ripped away the gunny-sack window pane, heaved himself through the window. He crouched there in the gloom of early night, listening. Dimly, he heard the sounds Slip and the other two outlaws made in the night. But mostly, Doc heard his own heavy breathing. It sounded loud to him, and he checked it.

From now on, he had to play his cards close to his vest. It wouldn't be long before the whole pack would be after him. If he slipped up—if he allowed them to catch him. . . .

He knew he didn't have time to steal one of their horses. He slid around the corner of the ramshackle barn. He knew the place as well as his own hand, Doc Anderson thought. He was hidden from the line shack windows, and he grinned, looking about him. This was the big Hawkes Bar H ranch. And to think that John and Anthony Hawkes had led posses after a mysterious outlaw gang from this very ranch!

Noise rumbled from the cabin. A door slammed, and the rumble became an uproar. The muscles in Doc's stomach tightened; the next few minutes were going to be hard on his nerves. He dropped to his knees, then flattened out on his stomach, hunkered close to the side of the barn.

Feet pounded close by. He could hear Slip Marsden cursing and John Hawkes' roar as he lashed his crew to more speed. Doc quit breathing for a moment as a dark figure passed close enough to reach out and touch him. The man jerked his saddle off the peg and the flapping cinch brushed Doc's cheek. But things were working out all right. They were saddling and riding—figuring that Doc would take to flight like a scared partridge.

"C'mon, c'mon," Hawkes called impatiently. "If he gets too much of a start into the brush—"

"Take it easy, will you?" It was Jake Stern's big voice. "He'll head straight for town. One of us'll simply ride ahead and wait for him at the edge of town."

"I don't want any shooting that close to town if I can help it," Hawkes answered. "But to play safe—Jake, ride to the crossroads and wait by the trail. And don't miss!"

They galloped off, one horse breaking away

from the bunch and heading straight for town. The rest of them rode into the tangled brush that covered the mountain slope rising behind the line shack.

Doc waited. Five slow minutes crawled by. The sound of their horses had long since faded. Doc got cautiously to his feet. But when he edged around the barn, his heart sank. There were no horses in the corral. He'd counted on there being one left.

Eight miles west, in the opposite direction from Butte Center, was the Star in a Circle ranch. He could make that in a few hours—long before daybreak. His spirits rose. By morning he'd have this whole Valley up in arms—he'd stop this wave of lawlessness that threatened to bankrupt most of the ranchers, already heavily in debt to the Hawkes' brothers' bank. . . .

The tongue of flame from the cabin window was like the crack of doom to Doc. He heard the crash of the rifle as his senses reeled under the impact of the slug. It knocked the breath from him and flung him to the ground.

More tongues of orange flame stabbed into the darkness. The snarl of lead sounded

But first he'd have to stop that blood—and if it didn't get attention soon, it was going to give trouble.

He ripped his shirt to pieces and managed to get a clumsy bandage on. The bleeding eased up some. Doc wished that he'd be able to stay here until it had stopped entirely.

From back in the brush came the faint sound of a gunshot. John Hawkes had heard the signal and was returning. Doc drew a few deep breaths and got to his feet. The game was getting tight.

HORSES crashed through the brush. He worked his way to the right, then hunkered down as a band of horsemen passed. He could see John Hawkes' big body swaying in the saddle of the lead horse. Behind him rode Slip Marsden. Doc held his breath, then plunged through the brush again as soon as they passed on.

Red hot stabs of pain were shooting all through Doc's shoulder now, and spreading up and down his right side. The wound was becoming hot and feverish.

Doc began to travel more slowly to conserve

SPORTS NOVELS, our companion publication, has grown—it now holds more of the kind of fast-action stories you like to read than ever before! And in the new, large-sized April issue you will find Lance Kermit's latest, TEN-GRAND FLOP—on sale at your newsstand now!

closer to the ground. He rolled desperately to one side; half crawled, half dragged himself around the corner of the barn. There was silence as he stumbled to his feet. He broke into a shambling run.

Behind him, he heard the outlaws pounding toward the barn. Doc crashed through the brush, with agony rippling through his body. The numbness was leaving his right shoulder now, sharp, stabbing pains replacing it. As he ran, Doc tore at his shirt, ripped a strip from it and pressed it against his shoulder.

Behind him, the rifle continued to bark. But the night was his friend, and he used it as only a hunted animal can. He ducked and dodged and buried himself deeper into the friendly brush until the silence told him that the man behind him had given up the chase. He thanked heaven for the westerner's hatred of foot travel. The next instant three evenly spaced shots rang out. The owlhooter back there was signaling to John Hawkes and his band ahead; signaling that he'd flushed the quarry.

Sobbing from exertion, Doc dropped to the ground. Expert fingers probed his own wound. It wasn't bad, high in the shoulder.

his strength and make less noise. Twice, and then again, he froze in his tracks at the sound of horsemen nearby. Once he was close enough to hear the killers calling to each other as they combed the range for the man who could hang them if he reached help in time.

The pain in his shoulder was turning him sick now. It was almost midnight, he thought. The hours of the night seemed to stretch endlessly behind him, and ahead—

Suddenly, he was beside a small stream, splashing his feet in it, sloshing it over his face. He shook his head, trying to remember how he'd gotten there.

Fever from his wound was making him delirious. With shaking fingers, he bathed the ugly hole in his shoulder. The cool water felt good on it. He took time to make a better bandage, then looked around for landmarks.

He was less than four miles from Jeff Hastings' place. He struck off at once. Four miles. Only four short miles. Pain began to swell through him again. It throbbed and pounded through his body. Four miles! Four long, hard, pain-wracked miles!

One step he'd be burning up, and the next step, he'd be shivering like a hound dog just out of a cold river. Four miles. He kept walking. Once he heard the sound of horses a long way off. He laughed, he didn't know why. Four miles. Then he frowned in puzzlement. Four miles to what? Didn't make sense.

When he came to again, he was back by the stream. Stretched out on the bank this time, with one hand trailing in the water. With an effort he got to his knees. He almost toppled over when he tried to scoop up some of the water to put on his shoulder.

Four miles. He tried to laugh, and couldn't. He was further down the stream than he had been before, further from Hastings' place. More like six miles now; and he was a lot weaker.

He lay still this time when he heard John Hawkes and his men nearby. After a while, he knew they were gone again and he wriggled forward until his shoulder was in the water. He lay there for a long time, until the coolness of the mountain stream had revived him some. Gingerly, he felt his shoulder. The cold water had brought the swelling down a little and he felt better. He got to his feet.

A few minutes of walking, and he was in a crazy nightmare. Gigantic horsemen loomed up in front of him; he could hear Slip Marsden's drunken laughter, just before Slip shot at him. And then he thought he had to detour, because right ahead, he could see a tumble-down shack where he'd been held prisoner. He could see red tongues of rifle flame spitting through the window at him.

Then, in lucid moments, he'd try to pick out landmarks and head for Jeff Hasting's ranch, but it didn't work. He'd go out of his head again and when he came to, he'd be back near that stream.

At daybreak he found himself in a sort of clearing. He stood there, and after a while he heard his own voice. "This won't do. Gotta stick to the brush. Hide."

He shambled forward, then stopped. Ahead was a neat little log cabin. Smoke was curling out of the chimney. Doc remembered a patient of his who lived in a place like that. A nester's wife. Nice people, even if they hadn't paid him. Name of Wilson. He shook his head. His voice was going on and on. Must be delirious again.

"All right, Anderson. That's as far as you go."

Doc turned around. Back in the edge of the brush was John Hawkes. The outlaw held a Winchester leveled at him. He looked at Hawkes' face; read the grim intent in the man's eyes. Slip Marsden and Jake Stern reined up behind him. Marsden's Colt was in his hand.

"Gave us quite a chase, Anderson," Hawkes said flatly. "But you never had a chance from the start."

Down at the little cabin, a dog began to bark loudly. From the corner of his eye, Doc saw the nester, Wilson, open the door and look out. In another moment he had stepped outside and was staring curiously at the strange group on the edge of the clearing. Slip Marsden cursed.

"Have to clean out that bunch of nester rats now, huh?" he asked Hawkes.

Jake Stern spoke suddenly. "I don't like it," he growled. "We got this county right where we want it—but too much killing'll stir people up. There'll be posesses out day and night."

"Don't be a fool!" John Hawkes snapped. "We can't leave them nesters alive to carry tales to town, any more than we can let Anderson get back alive."

Doc was remembering the purpose of his professional visit to the Wilson homestead. Anna Wilson had had a son; seven and a half pounds, he remembered. Good people. The kind this country needed. That kid was about a year old now. Doc turned to John Hawkes.

"I'll make a deal with you, Hawkes," he said. "Tell these people some cock-and-bull-story about how I got shot. I'll keep my mouth shut tight—won't try no doublecross. Then—"

"He's talking sense," Jake broke in. "Too much killing ain't good."

"Don't see why it should make any difference to you whether they live or die," Slip Marsden addressed Doc.

"He's a doctor," Hawkes said.

He stared at the medico for a long moment, then nodded. "It's a deal, Doc. Here comes Wilson." He patted his holstered six-gun, and jerked his head toward the nester. "It's up to you."

ANNA WILSON came hurrying out while Doc was telling her husband how he'd gotten shot. He hoped his story about some mysterious rustlers who had kidnapped him to dig lead out of one of them, sounded true. Wilson nodded.

"We heard about them robbing the bank last Saturday. Thought one of them was hit bad." Slip Marsden coughed and looked sideways at John Hawkes.

Doc told how he'd broken away from the rustlers and stopped a stray slug; how John Hawkes had heard the shooting, gathered some men and driven off the outlaws.

The Wilsons wanted to put Doc to bed and keep him there until he was well and strong again. For a moment, Doc couldn't figure out any argument against that. John Hawkes cut in:

"We know it'll be hard on the Doc, but it's

best that he go with us. He can identify those men."

The Wilsons compromised by insisting that Doc's wound be cleansed and bandaged before he left. They helped him into the little cabin. It was as neat as a pin, and Doc noticed that there was more furniture than before; most of it homemade. The baby was there, too, playing in a homemade playpen. Anna Wilson hurried to get bandages and hot water.

Doc relaxed on the bed; let his head sink on the pillow. That was a mistake. He was still full of fever, and stretching out on his back made the room spin. Doc fought the dizziness; he tried to sit up, but Wilson gently forced him to lie quiet.

The room began to spin faster and suddenly it was full of those crazy images. The window of the cabin became the window of the line shack, and there was rifle flame spewing at him. And he still had four miles to go! Four miles to Hastings ranch. . . .

Doc was fighting his way up, up, out of a deep dark pit. He could see faces above him; faces that wavered and wobbled and wouldn't hold still.

Anna Wilson was finishing the bandage on his shoulder when things began to clear up again. Her face was pale, and her fingers shook slightly as she adjusted the wrappings. Her husband stood a few feet away, his face gray with worry under his tan. Doc jerked his gaze around.

The outlaws had drawn their guns.

"You spilled it, Anderson," Hawkes grated. "While you were out of your head with the fever."

Doc tried to sound lighthearted. "Why—why, nobody would believe what a man says when he's delirious. People say the damndest things when the fever's got 'em. Why—if I said anything that sounded funny—"

"Aw, dry up," Slip said wearily. "You ain't talking your way out of this. You been too damn much trouble already."

Doc looked at Wilson. His wife had moved over to be near him. He had his arms protectingly around his wife's shoulders. There was grim hopeless defiance in his face.

"I thought there was something funny when I first saw you," Wilson said. "Don't worry, Doc, these men wouldn't dare—"

A harsh crackle broke through Slip Marsden's lips. Doc shook his head helplessly.

These innocent people had no idea of the caliber of the men they were dealing with. Doc could read his and Wilson's death sentence in the cold ice that lay in the back of John Hawkes' eyes. Wilson drew his wife closer, and Doc could see him furtively eyeing a rifle on the far wall. Inwardly, Doc groaned. Wilson would live to take one step toward that rifle, and no more.

Slip Marsden was hefting his six-gun.

DOC ANDERSON fell back on the pillow. He rolled his eyes wildly, moaned, then jerked bolt upright in bed.

"Four miles to go!" he yelled. "Four miles to Hastings' ranch." Anna Wilson hurried to his side, placed a trembling hand on his forehead.

"Off his nut again," Marsden growled.

"Four miles to go!" Doc repeated. "Then I'll be rich—rich with reward money." He laughed, a high-pitched cracking sound. "Why, Slip Marsden's worth five thousand! Hawkes thinks he's going to get that—told me how he had it all planned—but I'm gonna fool him." He laughed again. "I'll fool 'em all—"

Slip Marsden cursed. Doc took a cautious look around.

"Slip!" Hawkes was roaring. "You fool—it's a trick—Slip—!"

The big forty-five in Slip's hand exploded. A long tongue of flame leaped at John Hawkes, seemed to hammer him back against the wall. Then thunder rolled from Hawkes' gun and Slip Marsden buckled in the middle. The little cabin rocked with the concussions as Wilson snatched his rifle from the wall and fired from the hip at Jake Stern.

It was over as suddenly as it had begun. Doc got out of bed, examined a bullet burn along Wilson's side, swabbed it with iodine, then turned his attention to the three men on the floor.

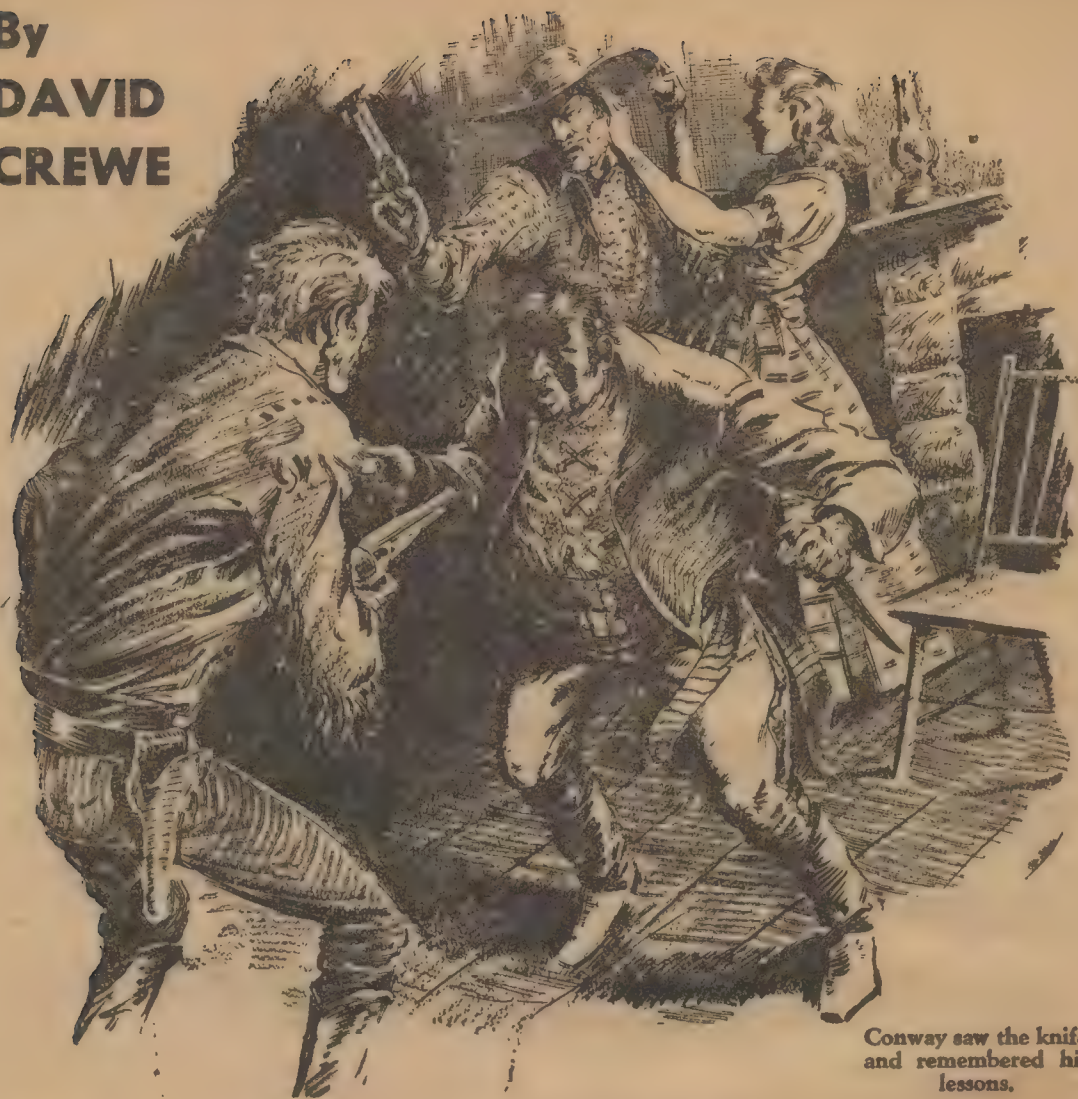
"Wilson, you better ride to town. The sheriff shouldn't have any trouble rounding up the rest of this gang. I think Hawkes might live to hang—" His voice trailed off as a new sound came from the kitchen. He hastily applied a compress to the wound in Hawkes' side, then hobbled painfully toward the new sound.

"Sounds like that son of yours has the whooping cough," he said. "Now after you see the sheriff in town, go by my place and get that big brown bottle. . . ."

WAR BONDS ARE WAR WEAPONS

BUY AND SERVE!

By
**DAVID
CREWE**



Conway saw the knife
and remembered his
lessons.

Blood on the Cimarron

There was blood and flame on the Cimarron—and no one to do anything about it until the Greenie from Missouri asked to be shown that he had something to die for!

MILES CONWAY saw the red glow that brightened the Cimarron horizon ahead, and the sight stiffened him as straight as the ramrod in the long rifle resting across the bows of his saddle. For a long moment he studied the red stain in the sky, and then he wheeled the big horse between his knees and sent it racing back toward the white tilts of the Trevor train, a quarter mile behind him.

"Greenie," they called him in the caravan. Some used the name half affectionately, and others voiced it with sly malice. But even a St. Louis greenhorn, riding night guard for the first time, could tell that glow against the Cimarron sky was made by burning wagons.

Ducking low in his saddle, Conway put Traveler between the tiptilted tongue and tailgate of two wagons. A community campfire danced and sparkled in the center of the

wagon square, and he heard the hearty voices of men and women raised in song, forgetful of the weariness of the finished day. He liked to join these evening songfests himself, but his wind was still a little short, and he couldn't manage many bars of the rollicking tunes they sung.

The racket of his coming brought heads around, and Asa Trevor, their lean and handsome captain, standing with a song book in his hand, asked maliciously, "What'd you see, Conway? A Comanche ghost?"

The wind and the heat of six hundred miles of prairie passage had bronzed Miles Conway's face, and even added a little flesh to cheeks pneumonia had thinned. His gray eyes were sober as he looked at Trevor.

"There's red light ahead," he said in a voice that was still a little husky. "Wagons burning. I thought—"

"I'll do the thinking," Asa Trevor replied, and lines deepened from flaring nostrils to mouth as his thin lips pulled down. "Some fool must have tipped over a lamp in a train ahead of us. It ain't our concern."

Ring-tail Manton was the name of the quiet little buckskin scout they had picked up at Arkansas Crossing to pilot them across Hell's Cut-off to Las Vegas at the yonder edge of the Cimarron. He was hunkered at the rim of the camp-fire circle, idly combing his fingers through the gray-speckled beard that covered his face. He spoke mildly, without looking up.

"Ain't been sign of no caravan movin' along in front of us. Most likely its some mule-train haiding this way. An' most likely they're loaded to the hilt with silver and gold picked up for whatever cargo they carried to Santy Fe, or down into Chihuahua. Them's the kind of outfits the *Comancheros* like to hit. Its a heap sight easier to steal gold and silver than pots and pans. Now if t'was me doin' it, I'd mount this bunch, and go see could I lend 'em a hand—"

"You're not doing it!" Asa Trevor snapped. "What if that fire is only a blind to pull us away from our wagons, so the raiders can slip in and take us without a fight?"

Miles had been listening intently to the interchange of ideas, and he couldn't keep from voicing one of his own. "There's not enough wood on this desert to make a blaze as big as I spotted. If the shoe was on the other foot we'd sure like somebody to come and give us a hand!"

He was almost as tall as the big captain, but the ravages of illness had sucked most of the flesh from his bones, leaving him splinter-thin. Asa Trevor's eyes swung contemptuously over the St. Louis man.

"Greenie," he said, "you don't know a damned thing about this!"

Some of the emigrant members of this caravan had already struggled to their feet. They'd hooked up at Council Grove with Trevor's four big Conestogas loaded with goods for stores he owned in Santa Fe and Taos, and the train was sized now at sixteen wagons.

"I ain't so sure but what Greenie's got it right," one of them muttered. "Conway, I'll ride with yuh. Why, them folks ahead might even have a jug of that thar Taos brandy I've heard so much about!" He grinned through bearded lips. "Any of you other fellers feel like tastin' some?"

Ring-tail Manton had risen with the slow, feline grace that characterized all his movements. He stepped to Conway's side, and his faded eyes showed their approval. "Yuh may be a greenhorn, and a sick un at that," he murmured. "But I like your speerit."

"You can't leave these wagons—" Trevor started to thunder.

Emigrant men were already snatching rifles and revolvers from their wagons, and running to cut horses from the cavvy held in a rope corral at one corner of the square.

The scout's chuckle was dry. "Looks like you ain't got much to say about it, Cap'n. 'Course if your craw is tight you can stay here and keep the women company."

Asa Trevor's eyes were black and malevolent. Miles felt the impact of thir hate as they turned on him, but the captain said nothing as he stalked away.

Manton had also left him to saddle his riding mule.

Traveler pawed sand beside him, and Miles felt a curious surge of strength fill his thin body. By some strange alchemy of men's thoughts he had been elevated to the command post of their rescue party, he realized. A St. Louis greenhorn who had only learned to use a Green River blade and the Colt revolver at his hip since leaving Council Grove. The knowledge made him laugh a little as he swung into saddle. He was certainly getting the change of scene and activity the St. Louis doctors had advised.

OUTSIDE the wagon square they gathered, and the red glow ahead was an ugly stain against the blue-blackness of the sky. Miles found himself hesitating momentarily. It was Trevor's right to lead this ride, but the Train Captain said coldly: "Your party, Conway."

Manton rode beside him, and Miles felt the cool rush of wind against his face as he pushed Traveler to full gallop. One mile and another dropped behind their mounts, and Miles found himself hoping that something would come out of this ride to give his life the meaning it must have to complete his re-

covery. But that was not to be counted on.

They were climbing a desert ridge now, and the rest of the party was stretched out two-by-two behind them. The glow was just beyond the rise, and he heard Ring-tail Manton curse throatily.

"We're late," he growled. "You'd be hearin' guns by now if airy soul was left to fight."

The scout was correct. Miles saw that as they crossed the ridge, and swept down to the hollow beyond. He felt futile curses rising in his own throat.

A dozen mules lay dead in a little circle where their owners had killed them to form a shelter against hailing raider lead. The two small wagons that had sent their fiery light into the sky were smouldering red eyes lighting death and devastation.

Manton reined in at the edge of the pitiful circle, and folded his arms across the pommel of his saddle. Miles sat stiffly beside him, and he was looking at his first men killed by violence. There were six of them, some with rifles still clutched in their hands. Others were sprawled back, their silence merging with the desert's.

"They're still wearin' their ha'r," Manton said. "Even squaw-men and renegades don't stummick scalpin'."

Rawhide *alforjas* were scattered about the circle, supplies they'd held ruthlessly strewn over the bloody sands. The oblong bulk of an over-turned trunk caught Miles' eye. White pantalettes fluttered from beneath the lid of it, but there was no sign of a dead woman within the macabre circle, and even a greenhorn from St. Louis could guess what had happened to her. As he stared at that sign, Miles thought he saw the trunk lid quiver. It was probably just his eyes tricking him, he realized, but just the same he swung down and entered the bloody circle.

Manton was right behind him, calling across his shoulder, "One of yuh git back to camp for shovels. Coyotes will have these bodies before mornin' if we don't bury 'em."

The scout had evidently failed to notice the movement of the trunk lid, Miles thought as he knelt and righted the big, leather-bound box. It seemed heavier than a trunk should, and he heard something thump inside. Then he had the lid open, and a pair of wide blue eyes were meeting a pair of equally wide and startled gray ones.

A TOUSELED red head emerged from lacy finery. A boy's tremulous lips bent in a tentative smile, and Miles felt it sink into him like the sudden bite of a hot iron. It was something he would never forget, he knew that instantly.

"You—ain't one of 'em," the boy piped. "You won't hurt me—"

Miles Conway looked at the waif, and he spoke words true in their prophesy. "No," he told the boy gently, "I'll see that nobody ever hurts you again, son."

Manton had padded up on silent moccasins. "I'll be a ring-tailed coon!" he stammered, for once in his life surprised. "They hid the younk beneath a gal's doo-dads, and when them devils ripped the lid open and found nothing but pants and sech, they looked no farther."

"My sis," agony was twisting the boy's mouth suddenly. "Ann, I heard her crying—"

Miles reached suddenly with wiry strength and decision down into the trunk.

"He's seen enough of hell!" he told Manton thickly.

"What's this, hiding under a woman's clothes—" Asa Trevor's dark, sharp face came pushing forward and Miles pushed out his right hand, palm open. The hard heel of it caught Trevor beneath the chin, and pushed the captain backward. "You'll leave him be," Miles said, and he hardly recognized the tone of his own voice. "Now, and from here on!"

And as he strode almost unseeingly to Traveler with that wailing, quivering burden in his arms, Miles Conway knew that the miracle had come to pass. A strange, fearsome miracle rising from the heart of blood and death, as he himself had risen from the shadow of death not so long before.

"I'll find your sister for you," Miles found himself promising the shaking burden in his arms.

"Find her, and finish the devils who did this killing—"

That was a tall promise for a greenhorn from St. Louis to make, but Miles Conway didn't think it sounded incongruous.

They got the boy's name, and pieced his story together back at the wagon train, after warm milk and some hot buffalo hump soup had made him relax a bit.

His name, they found, was Tim O'Malley, and his father had been an Irish trader, out of Westport Landing. He'd headed West a long time ago, taking with him a full complement of wagons and cargo for trade in New Mexico and Chihuahua. His mother and sister had come along to establish a new home in Santa Fe, as so many were doing. His father had journeyed on to Chihuahua, and while he was gone, Tim O'Malley's mother had died. Big Tim had returned to Santa Fe, "with lots and lots of gold in little bags." He had come home with fortune to find heart-break, and had packed the remainder of his family into a pair of small, light wagons, and with his gold and mules headed once more for the Missouri. He had rushed blind-

ly and he had not, perhaps, been as careful in his selection of a crew as a man should.

Young Tim was only six, and it was hard for a boy to remember things with a head still full of horror. But he seemed unable to forget one muleteer. "He had a rose on his face," the boy kept telling them. "A rose on his face," and he had seen the muleteer go to some place "where my daddy wouldn't go" when they had reached Las Vegas at the yonder edge of the Cimarron.

"THAT rose talk I don't savvy," Ring-tail Manton growled to Conway, after some of the motherly women in the caravan had tucked the waif into a bed where exhausted sleep at last claimed him.

"It could mean that he had a scar on his face," Miles told the scout, and his eyes turned pale and cold down to Manton. "That, of course," he added with a new certainty that was in him, "is something I will find out."

The scout was hunkered beside the wagon where the boy slept, aimlessly poking at the sand with the tip of a blunt stick. Conway's remark roused him. He looked up at the gaunt man from St. Louis and blinked. There was a look of serenity on Miles' face he had never discerned there before.

"And how are you aimin' to go about that?"

While a part of his mind had pieced together young Tim O'Malley's halting tale, another section of it had been laying his own plans. Now he explained them to a suddenly attentive scout.

"Traveler is saddled and still fresh," he said simply. "I aim to take the back-trail of those raiders tonight."

"They'll split like a covey of quail," Manton said mildly. "I've seen it happen before. Ain't nobody ever been able to trace a bunch like that to their hide-out, or even find out how they seem to know just what outfits are rich enough to hit, either comin' or goin'. So what chance—"

"I don't know," Miles told the scout honestly, "but I've got some ideas that maybe none of the rest of you fellers ever had."

"You go to namin' 'em," Manton suggested, a little caustically.

Miles nodded. His hand swept out to encompass the dark desert beyond the wagons. "Coyotes, buzzards, and Comanches are about all that can live there. Your renegades—you call them *Comancheros*—can't and won't live like your redskins. They rob and kill for profit, and money to them is something to spend. You can't spend it in the desert, Ring. And you can't pick up news of rich trains heading for Santa Fe, and gold-loaded ones coming this way unless you're in a

place where spies working with those trains can get easy word to you."

"Wisdom from the mouth of babes!" Ring-tail Manton breathed. "Son, I know more than one passel of troops and trappers and emigrants who've scoured Hell's Cut-off from Las Vegas to the Arkansas, and they ain't found nothin'."

"They found nothing," Miles told the scout slowly, and his gray eyes were intent, "because there was nothing to find. Most times your *Comancheros* ain't *Comancheros* at all. Mebbe they deal poker. Mebbe they do most anything, except when their spies bring word to the right place, and then they gather for a ride like they made tonight."

"Las Vegas," Manton muttered.

Miles leaned forward. "I don't know much about that town—"

"They's three trails that cross the Cimarron from Arkansas Crossing," the scout explained. "The Upper which is the longest and safest. The Middle which is gettin' right popular. And this Hell's Cut-off which some folks call the *Jornado del Muerto*—Journey of Death. Its the quickest, but the toughest. A gent's got to know his way to travel this route. All three trails land yuh in Las Vegas. From there it ain't more'n a whoop and holler to Glorieta Pass, and Santa Fe acrost the divide. If you're thinkin'—"

"I'm thinking," Miles told him, "that a lot of *Comanchero* trails are apt to end in Las Vegas!"

"And I'm thinking that if they do, and you light on one," Ring-tail Manton's face was sober, "your life won't be worth a plugged Mex *centavo*!"

Miles thought of a boy, and a girl whose cries that youngster would probably never forget and, like an echo to his thoughts, he heard young Tim's shrill voice speak from restless sleep:

"A rose—a rose on his face—"

The words lifted Miles to his feet. "There's your answer," he told the scout gently, "I'll take my chances."

HE WAS quietly climbing Traveler in the dark silence of the wagon square, when Asa Trevor spoke from beside the rope corral. "I've been watching you, Conway," the train captain came into the clear, "and I want to know what you're aimin' to do?"

Miles studied the other silently. When the captain was almost to his stirrup, he said softly, "I'm pulling out, Trevor. If we hadn't spent so much time palavering tonight, we might have saved some of those folks."

"You insinuat'in'—" Trevor's hand reached toward the Colt on his hip.

"I wouldn't pull that thing were I you,

Asa," Manton murmured from behind the trader. "I got a Green River blade in my hand, hankerin' to taste blood. Git on about your business, and leave us be. If it warn't for the women and kids in this outfit, I'd be ridin' on along the Cut-off with Conway!"

Trevor looked from the scout to the St. Louis man with his dark face full of pure rage; then he controlled himself, and shrugged his high shoulders.

"Your choice, Greenie," he said flatly. "But if you leave these wagons tonight, don't try and come back to them. I'll not have you with us again!"

Miles matched the other's calm, but his heart was still singing its strange, new, aggressive song. "Your privilege, Trevor," he said, and then he turned his gray eyes to Manton. "Ring," he added gently, "take care of Tim. I will see you both in Las Vegas."

The railers had separated just as Ring-tail Manton had said they would. Even a greenhorn from St. Louis could see that as he watched tracks leave the ruts of the Cut-off Trace and swing into the desert. It gave him a sense of satisfaction to view that breakup, because it reinforced his opinion that Las Vegas was where the *Comancheros* gathered when raiding time came.

It would take two days or more for cumbersome wagons to reach the yonder edge of the Cimarron, but with Traveler moving effortlessly beneath him, Miles neared it soon after the first brazen heat of morning sun struck his back.

Directly ahead of him loomed the green of trees lining the bosquet of a small stream that half-circled the adobe town lying on a flat beyond. He paused in the deep shade of the ford and let Traveler drink. The merry murmur of the water was the sweetest music he had ever heard, Miles thought, and the taste of it was better. He raised his own dripping face, and the sudden need for sleep clamped on him like a pair of tongs. His head had started to buzz, and he knew that he would need a clear, sharp mind once he entered the town ahead.

With that thought, he led his horse downstream until trees sheltered them, and in a glade where there was some grass, he picked the animal and lay down on its blanket.

It was close to dark when he awakened and Miles saw that he had slept the day through. Hunger gnawed at him with sharp violence, and the feeling was enjoyable. He had never felt better in his life, and his thoughts turned to young Tim. A living thing, snatched as though by a miracle from death. . . .

"Might be we'll learn together about this country," Miles murmured the words to himself. "Him and his sister, and me—"

That was a bright dream for a man who had been alone so long.

BY THE time he reached the town, the sun had dipped below jagged mountains to westward and shadows were coming to soften the outlines of flat-roofed adobes.

Few people were on the streets. A tamale vendor in huge hat and serape hawked his wares from beneath the comfortable shade of a drooping pepper tree in the town square.

Miles dropped from his saddle beside the man and put out his hands expressively. A tamale was promptly shoved into them and the chili in it burned his Eastern palate like damnation. It was no idle gesture when he clutched his throat, and made the motion of drinking.

The dark-faced vendor grinned. "*Andale*," the man said, and he gestured at the far side of the square where an adobe many times larger than the rest was set back behind a shoulder-high wall. A faded legend above its arched door named it *El Cantina del Negrito*, the Tavern of Night.

Horses were racked at a long pole before the wall, and Miles smiled at the vendor and nodded. He had traveled through a good half of the town to reach this tree-shaded square, and he had noticed no other Mexican version of a saloon. The *Cantina del Negrito* seemed to be the only establishment of its kind—and words that were like ghosts in his ears came back to him.

He had a rose on his face, young Tim O'Malley had kept telling them. A rose on his face, and he had seen the muleteer go to some place "*where my daddy wouldn't go*—"

Big Tim O'Malley had been Irish. And Miles Conway had never known an Irishman who would pass up a drink if he could get one. So if he'd stayed clear of the *Cantina del Negrito* he'd had good reason.

There was silver change in the pocket of his saddle-stained gray pants, and also a small leather pouch carrying the total gold he possessed. Deliberately, Miles pulled the pouch from his pocket, shook yellow money into his hand. He watched the Mexican's sleepy eyes glitter, and then the *pisano* shrugged expressively. He could not change the gold, but he nodded again to the *cantina* and rose to accompany the St. Louis man.

Reins looped over his arm, Miles walked beside the Mexican, and he was thinking that sometimes the greener a man acted the quicker action might come to him.

MILES looked the *cantina* over as he entered through the *posada* door and followed the vendor toward the scarred bar that stretched across one end

wall, and he admitted to himself that his Eastern eyes had never seen anything quite to equal it. A cross-section of the whole West seemed to be here, livening themselves after the heat of the day. On a serape-hung balcony that stretched the length of the far side wall, a group of musicians brought music from guitars and violins. Gaming tables lined the main floor, with a cleared space down the center for those who wished dancing.

But at this early hour the crowd seemed chiefly interested in drink. Trappers, homeward bound from Taos and the Rockies were swigging brandy and winking at señoritas who smiled their answer. Frock-coated gamblers mingled with dark-skinned caballeros. Teamsters, fresh from bedding down their mules and oxen, were sampling brandy and Chihuahua wine, and growing happily drunker by the minute.

If a man stayed here long enough, Miles thought, he would hear and see everything. It was a place where a word could drop from whispering lips, and no one but a person interested would notice. It was also a place where brandied tempers might explode in sudden violence.

A man carried his own law into the *Cantina del Negrito*, and took his own chances.

A squat, broad figure in the flamboyant garb of the country held Miles' gaze at the opposite end of the bar. His clothes were fawn-hued velvet, laden with gold braid. Tight-laced breeches snugged his legs. A yellow sash banded his thick middle. His shirt was white cambric, and a short, open jacket spanned his shoulders. Miles' eyes touched the man's broad, round face and he saw that the other was smiling, showing white teeth. He gathered, presently, the impression that the garish one was always smiling.

The *pisano* in front of him kept moving steadily forward. He stopped before the smiling Mexican and gestured at the money Miles still held in his hand, then his eyes flicked over the tall St. Louis man.

"Enrique Manuel," the vendor introduced.

"Senor," Manuel bowed, and his English was smooth, "eet is a pleasure to welcome strangers to my poor *cantina*. Particularly strangers bearing gold!"

Miles matched the other's mood. "There's more where it came from," he said coolly, and his thoughts were running fast. "I've been traveling with a wagon train," he confided, "but me and the captain weren't getting along—so I rode on in alone."

"Perhaps you came by the Middle Crossing?"

The question was carefully phrased.

Miles let his gray eyes meet the Mexican's. "No," he drawled, "we've been traveling Hells Cut-off. There was a little trouble up

ahead of us last night, and some dead men were left behind."

The smiling Mexican clicked his tongue against his teeth. "*Ah, dios!*" he sighed. "Those *Comancheros*! All were dead you say, señor?"

Miles hesitated briefly. A greenhorn from St. Louis had no business trying to match wits with a Las Vegas veteran, but he was going to try it, just for luck.

He hesitated long enough to arouse the other's suspicions, then said briefly, "Alas, yes. They were all dead."

He saw the smile disappear momentarily from the Mexican's mask-like face. "There is nothing we can do about these *renegados*," he said sadly. "*Por dios*, thought of them leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Will you not drink a horn of the Taos brandy with me, señor? You weel enjoy eet—I promise you that!"

Miles spent the rest of the evening at the bar, and he sipped brandy sparingly, because it was hot enough to make a man's head hum. Enrique Manuel had moved away from him after the first drink and no one else came to disturb his contemplation. He dallied until midnight, then moved outside to his horse. Slowly he mounted and rode back to the creek, and his nerves were tight as wire. He had deliberately talked too much, and he had phrased his speech in such a way as to arouse suspicion. If he had been successful, the smiling Enrique Manuel would want to know exactly what knowledge he had of the slain muleteers. And until the Mexican learned the answer to that, Miles figured himself safe against a knife in the dark, or a bullet by day. Safe—until he could pick up the trail of Ann O'Malley.

Thinking of the girl brought another question into his mind. Why had the raiders bothered to take her captive? As long as they allowed her to live she would be a constant threat to their security. And the O'Malley gold they'd stolen would buy them all the women they wanted.

He dozed with other Las Vegans in the *posada* of the *Taverna del Negrito* the next afternoon. It was the siesta hour when few men stirred through the heat.

But one came, with a jingle of spurs, through the wide gateway in the *posada* wall. A black-bearded giant of a man, but the beard only covered a part of his face, for the hair wouldn't grow where the scar spread across one cheek. It was a livid ugly thing, and its shape was curiously that of a rose. Miles guessed that at some time a mule's kicking hoof had torn away that patch of flesh, and, healing, it had left the rose-shaped scar.

The man passed into the dusky *cantina*, and

he did not come back out again. Miles waited and watched for him, but only the tamale vendor came to sell him more of his fiery food.

That second evening was like the first. No one paid any attention to him, save Enrique Manuel. The Mexican was smiling as usual, and gestured with one fat hand toward the balcony where the musicians played.

"Perhaps," he said, "the good señor would enjoy seating on the balcony. From there one gets, how you gringos say, the bird's eye view of all that happens here."

Miles took his spiced Chihuahua wine and stretched his long legs up the stairway, narrow and steep. There was only one other table up here, he noticed, and it was empty. Three doors were set into the rear wall. Miles wondered what might lie behind them, but there was no way to find out. The first move was up to Manuel.

And the smiling Mexican was waiting—waiting for what? It was a question time might answer for him, and time was growing increasingly short. Tomorrow Asa Trevor and his caravan should be arriving. And there'd be a boy with that outfit worrying about his sister. Ann, he'd called her. Ann O'Malley—it was a name Miles Conway liked.

FROM the bosque of the creek where he had set up his meager camp, Miles watched a dust cloud mount into the brazen sky as the next day wore on. The Cimarron shimmered, and heat devils danced. Asa Trevor and sixteen big Conestogas were coming. Miles wondered if they'd make town by night, or be forced to set one more dry camp on the blistering Cut-off Trail.

He held his place beside the creek until dusk, and the slow-moving wagons appeared a little nearer. They'd never make Las Vegas before dark, he decided, and was grimly pleased. One more night might bring the break in the cat-and-mouse game the smiling Mexican was playing with him. Enrique Manuel was waiting for something.

Miles felt that thought stick in his throat like a suddenly swallowed bone, and then as twilight came he saw a black speck detach itself from the white caravan out there on the Cimarron and speed toward him. Miles watched the rider for a time, and then slipped quickly back into the trees. He made his way to the ford, and he was following a new train of thought that fitted like cards sliding into a straight flush.

Ring-tail Manton had said that spies from both ends of the Trace brought word to *Comancheros* of rich trains to raid. And their headquarters were right here in Las Vegas. He had established that fact, at least to his

own satisfaction. And now a rider was pushing forward from that caravan out there on the Cimarron. Trevor would be the only one with authority to leave the wagons—and Asa Trevor had stores in Santa Fe and mule trains that plied the route to Chihuahua. It would be a simple matter to mix the goods from raided wagons with legitimate merchandise.

Miles had heard no sound, but a voice came from behind him, just the same. "Friend," the tone was sardonic, "you ain't the only one who likes to watch the desert. Just stand your hand. It ain't time for you to die!"

Miles listened, and a feeling almost of exultation passed through him. The time for action had come. And the nearing Trevor train had precipitated it!

He turned, shoulders drooping as though in submission, but actually there was relaxation in all of his muscles just as Ring-tail Manton had taught him. "When you're loose all over," he'd counseled the St. Louis man, "yuh can move quicker than the closing jaws of a beaver trap, and the other feller ain't never expectin' it."

The giant with the rose on his face was the man Miles faced when he got around. The Colt the other was holding seemed dwarfed by the hugeness of his hand; white teeth gleamed through his black beard as he grinned. Plainly he didn't think much of the greenhorn from St. Louis.

"Mister," he drawled, "you've done a heap of talkin' around here, and yet it ain't been quite enough to suit some folks. So let's you and me take a little ride into town."

Miles moved toward the big muleteer, and he felt like David facing Goliath. "You—you'll want my gun," he stammered.

"That I will," the giant chuckled. "You won't need it where you're going."

Miles moved with a speed Ring-tail Manton had carefully schooled into him. "Take it then!" he said, and the bright blue of his Navy Colt was a streaking flash through the deep shade as it swung down toward the giant's wrist. He heard the sickening crack of bone as steel bit through flesh and the stricken, animal-like cry of the muleteer as he lunged forward, good arm flailing out like a sledge.

Miles stepped to meet him, and the barrel of his Colt was like a rapier reaching up to strike the other across the bridge of his beak nose. The blow was too hard! He knew that immediately as he watched the giant's knees loosen and pitch him forward into the sand.

The man was dead. The blow had broken his nose, driven the bone of it into his brain.

For the first time in his life he had brought death to another human. Miles Conway

stepped back, and looked down at the dead muleteer, and for a moment he felt not a little ill. But the feeling in him had nothing of regret. The man with the rose on his face was a *Comanchero* spy—but, the muleteer would have been the one to make talk, he thought grimly, if he hadn't struck him so hard.

THE rushing sound of hoofs coming in over the desert hit his ears. A rider crossing the ford might see the black-bearded man, Miles realized. He reached down and caught the other's heels. The muleteer's dead weight was almost more than he could manage. Miles felt his muscles pull as he heaved the giant behind creek brush.

The hoofbeats were louder now. They clattered down to the stream. Through the brush, Miles watched Asa Trevor quirt his black mount across the stream. The train captain's face wore an expression Miles had never seen on it before. Eagerness was in the slant of the man's mouth, in the haste with which he moved.

Miles turned, running back toward Traveler and unaccustomed curses were on his lips. If he'd taken time to saddle the big brown horse before going to the ford, he'd be ready now to follow Trevor. And if he hadn't struck so hard with the barrel of his Colt the muleteer might have made such trailing unnecessary. The man with the rose on his face had known the answer to all the questions Miles wished he'd been able to ask. But there was no use thinking about that now. Big Tim O'Malley had been avenged for one, but there were others, he thought bleakly, picturing the dead men they'd found on Hell's Cut-off. The red-headed boy was in his thoughts, too, as he swung into Traveler's saddle—young Tim O'Malley, and his sister, Ann.

The darkness had swallowed Asa Trevor and his black mount by the time Miles reached the flat leading into Las Vegas. He moved on ahead, confident he would find the black at the rail in front of the *Taverna del Negrito*, and the animal was there. He tethered Traveler beside the captain's mount, and moved across the dark *posada*, heels gritting on ancient flagstones.

Manuel, Miles noted when he entered was not at his accustomed corner of the bar. A

lean-faced *caballero*, with a pair of heavy Colts riding his flat thighs stood in the *cantina* owner's place.

"Brandy," Miles told the attendant behind the mahogany. He tossed down the first drink, and accepted another, one significant fact lifting the beat of his pulse. The musicians were seated at one end of the dancing space tonight, instead of on the balcony, and their playing was louder than usual. His eyes lifted involuntarily toward the three closed doors leading off the balcony. Behind one of them a man might find—what?

But if Manuel and Trevor were there they'd have the door barred on the inside. Then Miles' busy eyes watched one of the aproned tenders behind the bar leave his post with a tray that held bottles and glasses. He'd never seen that happen before. *Cantina del Negrito* patrons bought their own drinks and—if in a bottle—took it to a table with them.

The waiter was fat. His buttocks wobbled as he passed the lean *caballero* at the farther end of the scarred bar, and started to climb the balcony stairs. Miles' impulse was to follow the waiter but he controlled it. He saw the other's brown fist rap three times slowly on the first door, and after a moment it opened. An arm eased in fawn-hued velvet took the tray, and the door closed again.

Enrique Manuel wore fawn-hued velvet. He was up there, and so was Asa Trevor and a third party, for there had been three glasses on the tray. Miles watched the waiter descend the stairs, and his eyes swept momentarily about the busy floor. Noise and laughter and rollicking shouts filled the *cantina*. He saw careless, smiling faces, and the odd thought came to him that it was queer none of them were interested in what might be going on above their heads. He tried to shake it—this was his business alone . . . the business of a man living on borrowed time.

Miles watched the fat waiter descend the stairs, and he was remembering the rhythm of the other's taps on the upstairs door.

WITH steady fingers, Miles poured himself more brandy. Carrying his glass, he strolled toward the balcony stairs. The lean *caballero* side-stepped to the foot of them. The man was smiling, white teeth flashing, when Miles paused before him.

"I do not ask what has happened to the

To Our Subscribers:

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Because of the exigencies of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write to us complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

one with the rose on his face, señor," the lean man murmured. "Sometimes it is not wise to become curious. You comprehend, señor?"

"Yes," Miles said, and he was feeling fine. Danger, he discovered, seemed to have that effect on him. This was the last proof he needed that the two men he sought were in the room upstairs. "Yes," he repeated, "I understand," and he flipped the brandy in his glass at the face of the caballero. Like an amber ball of fire it struck the man in the nose, sprayed into his eyes.

"*Madre di Dios!*" the choked cry came from the New Mexican, and then Miles had his Colt in his hand, and again he was using its barrel like a club.

Ring-tail Manton had taught him that style of fighting. "Buffaloin' a man is a heap sight easier than shootin' him sometimes," the scout had counseled. "And it saves lead!"

As the steel struck, Miles heard a voice that was like an echo to his own thoughts. "Git on about your bizness, son," the words came in Manton's familiar tones. "Ain't nobody down here goin' to interfere. I got two Betsy's trained on the hull crowd, and I see me a bunch of gut-drunk trappers who'll likely side an old *amigo* should a ruckus git started!"

He was on the stairs, leaping across the crumpled shape of the caballero Manuel had left to guard their peace, and from a quarter-way up he twisted to take one look. Ring-tail Manton was on top of the bar, crouched like a cat. Light rolled along the barrels of his twin Colts. Manton had evidently followed Trevor to Las Vegas after the wagons were squared for the night. He had arrived at the right time, Miles thought grimly. Now if he could only hold the crowd—

Bloody-barreled Colt in hand, he twisted, and reached the balcony in three long strides. His knuckles rapped three times, softly.

The seconds' wait was longer than any hour he'd ever spent in his life. Then he heard the slithering sound of a bar being withdrawn from its slot and the heavy door shivered.

Two sounds came to the St. Louis man almost in the same instant. The first was a trapper's wild screech from the floor below. "No yuh don't, greaser. Ain't no knife going to fly at Ring Manton—"

And the second sound was a girl's quick cry from the room. "You've got our gold. That ought to be enough—"

Ann O'Malley was the third person in the room before him. They'd brought her here to hold for Trevor, Miles realized, and then there was no more time to think for all hell was breaking loose down on the *cantina* floor as Miles hit the door with one bony shoulder. It smashed inward, staggering Enrique Man-

uel backward. But the New Mexican was quick. Like something magical, a thin-bladed knife came from the folds of his sash. Miles saw the bright flash of it, and he used lead for the first time. Blood spurted from Manuel's throat, and a grimace that was almost like his usual smile contorted the fat man's face as he went over backward.

Trevor was in the center of the windowless room, and a tall girl with red hair stood proud guard over a small heap of canvas bags with the name O'Malley stenciled on them.

She flung herself toward Trevor as the Colt that had come from the captain's belt send lead flaming toward the St. Louis man.

Miles felt the shock of the bullet passing through his left arm, but he kept pressing forward. The gun in his own hand was useless, for Ann O'Malley had made a mistake by trying to aid him. Her body was against the captain's and he dared not fire for fear of striking her.

He threw himself against them, and they went down in a tangled heap. Trevor's gun coughed as they fell, and Miles felt the burning scrape of lead across his ribs. Then the captain's face was before him, and he swung once with the barrel of his Colt. Blue steel laid its hard length across the bridge of the man's nose, and Miles saw the light fade from Trevor's eyes. He felt the train captain relax, and the realization came to him that he had killed three men in less than three hours. Six men had lost their lives on Hell's Cut-off but when all of their souls met in Heaven or Hades, Miles had a hunch Big Tim O'Malley would call the score square, for there would be hundreds of others coming and going along the Trace who would live because these three had died.

Something of the same thought must have been in the girl's mind as they both gained their feet, for she said, "Dad will rest easier after this, and, I hope Tim will, too. Trevor told he was killed along with the rest—"

"Your brother," Miles told the girl, "was a mighty spry youngster when I pulled out from Trevor's train. He'll be waiting for us at the wagons. I told him we'd meet in Las Vegas—"

"And it'll be a heap sight cleaner town when you do," Ring-tail Manton's familiar drawl came from the doorway behind them. "Some of my mountain cronies have been takin' their fun downstairs, whittlin' on brown hides. Seems a leetle funny, though," he added introspectively, "that we've all been so danged blind it took a greenie from St. Louis to p'int the stick at this place!"

Miles looked at the scout, and his heart was singing its wild, new song. "Let's give credit to a country that—that teaches men to live," he suggested.

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 47)

1. Punchers passing on the range habitually howled at each other in the manner of a wolf.
2. Fabens McCord was once well known as a wealthy outlaw. He was ultimately dealt with by the vigilantes.
3. In the language of the cowboy, a "pillow chaser" was a sheep herder.
4. Buffalo Bill's grave . . . Colorado
Squaw Peak . . . Arizona
Giant Joshua Monument . . . California
5. The brand, "Lazy Edie," would be written with an "E" laying on its side, followed by the letter "D."
6. It quite often happened that when a cowpuncher disclosed plans of marriage to the rest of the boys he was thrown in the watering trough by way of celebration. Sometimes the ceremony was carried out as soon as the news was learned. At other times the men waited until the puncher had donned his wedding clothes before giving him his ducking.
7. The burning pillar was created by setting fire to a sahuaro cactus. This spectacular—but destructive—practice is now, fortunately, against the law in many western areas.
8. You would hunt him up and ask how the ore was running. A "lost soul" is a prospector.
9. Mexican vaquero . . . red sash
Northwestern Cowpuncher . . . Flat-topped Stetson
Puncher in "formal" dress . . . two six-guns
Dude . . . Wooley chaps.
10. True. Camelback Mountain is known for the rock formation resembling a monk.
11. The grooves prevent the fired bullet from tumbling end over end and cause it to twist in an irregular fashion.
12. A blind animal is often easily excitable and, hence, prone to start stampedes.
13. "Silver-shod" applied to a person means "wealthy." Applied to an animal it means "expensive."
14. "Lick" is "syrup" and "animal salt."
15. The typical fort in southwestern United States back in Indian fighting days was made of sun-baked adobe bricks.
16. True. Two well-known trails of the old West were the Chisholm and the Chisum.
17. True. In certain states it was illegal for the new owner of a livestock animal to obliterate the earmark of the old owner. This ruling, of course, was passed as a protection against rustling and mark "blotching."
18. A "fast" brand is an honest, legitimate brand. A "slow" brand is a brand which has merely been seared—not burned—and can be readily changed at a later date by a dishonest cattleman.
19. You would turn down his invitation to play poker. A "lightning Jim" is a card shark.
20. No. Even a seasoned Westerner cannot read all cattle brands correctly on sight, since brands are often read according to the whims of their owners and inventors.

We are always glad to cooperate with the government in supporting the war effort—and now the government desires to conserve paper.

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES magazine is pleased to announce that in complying with the new plans, it has been possible to adjust the type size in such a way as to give the readers, in the fewer pages, even more wordage than before.

TALES of the

by LEE and



"DIAMOND DICK" TANNER

RICHARD J. TANNER, HANDSOMEST DOG THAT EVER RODE THE PLAINS, HIS PALS SAID, & THE ORIGINAL OF "DIAMOND DICK," HERO OF INNUMERABLE BLOOD & THUNDER YELLOW BACK DIME NOVELS--ACTUALLY NEVER KILLED A MAN, WHITE OR INDIAN, OR A BUFFALO.

TANNER, BORN IN ILLINOIS IN 1869, LATER MOVED TO NEBRASKA WHERE HE GREW UP AMID THE SWASHBUCKLING, GUNFIGHTING GIANTS, GOOD & BAD, OF THE OLD FRONTIER. HE BECAME EXPERT WITH BOTH RIFLE AND PISTOL, & COULD "FAN" A SIX-GUN WITH THE SPEED OF LIGHT-- BEFORE HE WAS 16.

ONCE HE MADE A REMARKABLE "WING SHOT," KNOCKING DOWN A CRANE THAT WAS FLYING SO HIGH IT WAS BARELY VISIBLE.



TOO LATE TO TAKE PART IN THE ACTUAL TAMING OF THE OUTLANDS, HE EXHIBITED HIS SKILL WITH WILD WEST CIRCUSES, COVERED WITH DIAMONDS "LIKE A HEADLIGHT ON A STEAMBOAT COMING UP THE RIVER..." WHICH GOT HIM THE NAME "DIAMOND DICK."

AUDIENCES GASPED AS HE SHOT A PENNY OFF THE HEAD OF HIS PARTNER WITHOUT MUSSING UP HER HAIRCOMB.



OLD WEST

BEN NELSON

NEW YORK
LINCOLN

IN 1893 HE RODE HIS HORSE "GYP" FROM LINCOLN, NEBRASKA, TO NEW YORK CITY & BACK AGAIN - A RIDE OF 5,500 MILES, WHICH STOOD FOR YEARS AS THE LONGEST TRIP MADE BY ANY MAN ON ONE HORSE.

AT 31 "DIAMOND DICK" DISAPPEARED. SIX YEARS LATER DOC TANNER, JUST GRADUATED FROM LINCOLN MEDICAL COLLEGE, HUNG UP HIS SHINGLE IN NORFOLK, NEB.

R. J. TANNER
M.D.

DARED BY FRIENDS TO ENTER A RODEO SHOOTING CONTEST, THE COUNTRY DOCTOR TURNED IN SUCH A

SURPRISING SCORE THAT HIS AMAZED FRIENDS INVESTIGATED & ONLY THEN DISCOVERED THAT HE WAS THE FAMOUS "DIAMOND DICK," WHO HAD ALWAYS WANTED TO BE A DOCTOR.

AT 73 HE BROKE A LEG WHEN A CHAIR SLIPPED FROM UNDER HIM. COMPLICATIONS SET IN AND HE DIED - JOINING HIS QUICK-TRIGGERED FRIENDS "BUFFALO BILL," "WILD BILL" HICKOK, "CALAMITY JANE" & "PAWNEE BILL" IN THE OLD WEST'S HALL OF MEMORY.



"I'd hate to think there
was another as ugly as
me. . . ."

GILA RIVER SHOWDOWN

By
RAY P. SHOTWELL

*There was one man too many in
Gila Bend wearing Dusty Sharron's
face—one of them had to go!*

THE sudden clang of the rifle was like the strike of a hammer against a brassy gong, and at the report a sledge struck Dusty Bill Sharron just above the pommel line of his saddle, square on his filled cartridge belt, and drove him forward across the neck of his mount. In a chaotic split second a half-dozen quick thoughts rioted through Dusty's mind, and like a man mortally wounded, he reeled upright in his saddle, then let himself fall with realistic slackness from the back of his mount.

He struck the trail with a jar that knocked breath from his lungs, kicked once like a dying man, and ended prone, facing the hills from which the shot had come.

Evidently his acting had been good enough to fool the gulcher, for no more lead came winging toward him. Puzzlement mixed with anger and pain started to narrow his gray-green eyes as he studied the dry hills flanking the hot Chiquita trail.

Just why anybody should be wanting to take a shot at him was a question Dusty Bill Sharron couldn't answer. He was here solely because a Yuma gambler had told him there were jobs to be had in this Gila Bend country. And that was what Dusty Bill needed more than anything else right now. One lone penny nestled in the side pocket of his Levis—his total wealth—outside of twin Colts, and Ranger, his line-back dun.

The job he'd had before was good enough until he'd hung his guns on a corral post, and invited his overbearing foreman to do the same. Outweighed by twenty pounds, he still managed to whip the boss right down into the corral dust. With that chore finished he'd washed up, drawn his pay, saddled Ranger, and headed for Yuma. Some of the scars he'd gotten in that battle still marked his square, homely face.

In Yuma, he'd made the mistake of joining a poker game, and that was why he had just one centavo in his pocket now.

The affable gambler who'd won all of his pay had seemed to feel sorry for the sawed-off, stocky, young cowpoke. "Take yoreself a pasear to Gila Bend," he'd advised. "Shane Catlett up there is looking for men. You're not the first hombre I've sent along to him, and there ain't any of 'em come back yet, so I figure he's put 'em on the payroll."

"Mebbe they all got theirselves dry-gulched along this Chiquita trail!" Dusty muttered, with his eyes still on the sun-baked hills.

Then he stopped talking. A figure had stepped cautiously from behind one of the tawny boulders at the base of the hills, and the cuss was even smaller than himself.

"Ain't much longer than the rifle he's packin'!" Dusty thought.

Slowly, and cautiously, with the sunlight striking blue fire from the barrel of the long Winchester he was carrying, the bushwacker came down the slope. His clothes were shapeless and baggy. A floppy hat hid the gulcher's face, and then through the stillness of the afternoon, Dusty heard the sound of a sob, and surprise jerked him half upright in spite of himself.

"A cryin' bushwacker," he ejaculated. "I'll be damned!"

"Set right there, Kid Cash!" The shrill order came from the approaching figure, and

the rifle swung around to level on Dusty again.

DUSTY BILL SHARRON scuffed his stained Stetson back from his forehead, and answered the youngster honestly. "Son, I ain't got the slightest notion of movin', and my name ain't Kid Cash.

"G-gosh-a-mighty," the reply came hesitantly, as the boy got a look at Dusty with his hat pushed back from his face. "Yo're built the same, and from where I was waitin' you looked like the spittin' image of him. I shore warn't aimin' to plug the wrong man. You hurt, mister?"

The boy came closer, and Dusty had a chance to look him over. His face was thin and hungry-looking. He didn't look to be over twelve. Intense blue eyes, which were starting to mirror relief, peered at Sharron. Dusty grinned. It gave his battered face the look of a friendly bulldog.

The youngster sniffed and swiped at his nose with a faded shirt sleeve.

"You're the only man I've ever plugged," he explained. "Gives a fella a funny feeling' in his stummick—first man he draws a bead on."

"Shore does," Dusty agreed gravely.

He climbed stiffly to his feet, and dusted off his Levis. He was curious as a man could be, but he wanted to let the boy explain things in his own way. And there'd be an explanation coming, Dusty felt certain. Twelve-year-olds weren't in the habit of turning bushwhacker without the strongest urge.

As he straightened to his full five-five height, Dusty watched sheer wonder cross the youngster's face. "Blast me," he blurted, "you still look like Kid Cash! I kin tell the difference now—but you could sure pass for him in the dark."

Dusty moved to Ranger who had paused and was cropping grass alongside the trail. He lifted a canteen from the saddle, and proffered it to the boy. The youngster drank thirstily, and handed it back with a shaky grin.

"Yo're all right—" he approved, and then his eyes sharpened suspiciously—"less'n you're coming here to hire out to Shane Catlett."

Dusty Bill's faded brows rose quizzically. "Catlett?" he drawled. "Wa'al, now, I did hear in Yuma that he was looking for hands."

"Gunfighters," the boy snapped. "His man in Yuma musta taken a squint at your tie-hard Colts and figgered you'd make a good gun-recruit. But yuh won't, I'll bet, after I finish tellin' you what's going on around here. Wait for me to get my bronc, and we'll talk and ride for the river at the same time. That shot might bring some of Shane's crew if we don't move."

"I'll wait," Dusty promised. He swung into Ranger's saddle. Curiosity had always been a

failing with him, and right now there were at least a dozen questions running through his head.

He watched the boy strike out for the rocks where he had lain hidden, and appear moments later atop a lumbering old white horse. Plainly the animal was more suited to plow than saddle, and Dusty Bill felt the roan hackles along the back of his neck start to lift. Plows and plowmen were something to rouse the ire of any honest cowpoke. The sod-busters came along and ruined good range, and then drought would force them to move on, leaving nothing but scarred, useless acres behind. There were exceptions, of course. River bottomlands and such places where a farmer could make a living, but most times they didn't do anything but ruin good graze.

A thin cry from the youngster drew his full attention. He saw the kid pointing, gesturing for him to look on along the trail toward the distant Gila.

Dusty twisted in his saddle. Horsemen were coming. He counted a half-dozen riding hell-bent toward them and instinctively, he dropped his square, hairy hands to ease the Colts at his hips. A man didn't have to be a mind-reader to smell trouble coming.

THE riders and the boy halted on either side of Dusty like the closing jaws of a nutcracker, and for a moment the horsemen paid the cowpoke no attention. Their eyes were for the boy alone, and Dusty Bill had a chance to look them over.

The leader was a lean, coyote-faced man in his early forties. Pale eyes shone from beneath bristling, faded brows. Arrogance, the feel that power brings to a weak man, lay in the twisted slant of his narrow lips. Fawn-hued California pants snugged his legs, and his boots and white Stetson and fancy tooled belt had cost the equal of a cowhand's yearly wages. One thing Dusty Bill noticed with particular attention was the lack of guns on the man's hips.

But with five Colt-hung riders to back him, this coyote-faced hombre didn't need any.

One of the riders came pushing up to his leader's side, and two men got identical shocks at the same time. It was like looking in a mirror. Dusty Bill Sharron blinked. The hombre in front of him had the same, square-jawed, pugnacious face, the same short, stocky build.

Dusty Bill grinned. "Dog my britches," he drawled, "I didn't think there was another hombre in Arizony homely as me. So you're Kid Cash—"

Dusty knew even as he uttered the words that he'd made a mistake voicing the other's name, for he saw first surprise fade from the other's face.

Eyes narrowing, his lips framed a chilly question. "How come you know me, stranger?"

Shane Catlett snapped, "I'll ask the questions. And we'll start with the whippersnapper. What were you pottin' at, Mason?"

"It warn't no white-tail buck, Catlett!" the boy's freckles were like spots of rust against the pallor of his face.

His reply brought a shrug from Catlett. "We'll find out," he promised, "when you're settin' behind bars. Right now you're outside the boundary set down for you shanty sod-busters, and you're carryin' a gun. Hand it over, and come along. You're going to jail, Bob Mason!"

"Where yuh can kill me like you done my pop!" the boy cried shrilly. "Murdered him without ever givin' him a chance to come to trial. Shot him through the bars when his back was turned. Course you and your hired sheriff wouldn't know nothin' about it. But I'll bet you Kid Cash can tell you plenty!"

There was trouble here, plenty of it, Dusty Bill Sharron decided, and he felt the usual reckless anger start heating his blood. But sod-busters! Good God Almighty! If anybody had told him an hour ago that he was riding to Gila Bend to throw in with a plowman, he'd have been ready to fight.

And there might be a fight here yet, if he wasn't lucky.

The boy's shrill talk was holding Catlett and the attention of Kid Cash in the forefront of the sextet. It gave Dusty time to slip one hand behind his back cartridges dented by the impact of the Winchester slug that had struck them. His left hand plucked one from its loop and his right flicked Colt steel from leather.

"He was shooting at me, Catlett, and hit my belt. Here's a souvenir for you." Dusty tossed the cartridge across six feet of space separating them, and his steady Colt menaced the whole group. "Shootin' at me," he repeated flatly, "figuring it was you, Cash. That's how come I knew your name, and I'll do some shootin' myself right now unless you hombres get your hosses hightailin' it out of here. Ain't any range hog layin' down boundaries folks can't cross if I got anything to say about it. Now git! Looks to me like some Gila River farmers need a gunslinger of their own!"

Catlett's face turned murderous. "So you're hiring out to them, after Slade sent you up here to work for me."

Slade was the name of the friendly gambler who had won his pay in Yuma, Dusty recalled. The memory brought a faint smile to his lips. "I kinda had that idea, after playing the fool like plenty others have done. It ain't hard to see now that a gent who is broke might take

Slade's advice and come lookin' this way for a job. That's slick, Catlett, only here's one cowpoke who won't take your dinero. I ain't never liked to see a big dog jump on a little one, and it looks like that's what you're doing around here. You can keep that shell just to remember me by, and the next time we meet you better be wearin' a gun!"

"HULLY gee!" It was the boy speaking as he watched the sextet ride back the way they had come. "You done it, bluffed the whole caboodle. Wait till the colony hears about this!"

Dusty Bill's battered face was a study in bronze as he looked at young Mason. "Bob," he murmured, "Catlett and that Kid Cash didn't take their crew away from here because they were afeard of my guns. They could have finished us if they'd been a mind to spend men and lead. No. Catlett pulled out because he's got a better idea—you can count on that. Which means we better take that ride to the river you mentioned, and yuh better tell me just what I've stuck my danged button into!"

The story was as old as the West. Rich bottomlands along the Gila had attracted a farm colony to this Bend country and they had settled on land Catlett's C-Bar had been using without title, and which, therefore, was open to pre-emption. Ideal for farming, the graze the colony plows might destroy would be negligible, compared to the gain it would bring the whole area.

"For the first six months things ran smooth as cream from a pitcher," Mason continued. "We built our soddies and plowed and sowed our fields. We had free run of Gila Bend upstream aways. My dad—he was kind of our leader—worried a mite over the way tough riders kept drifting into the Bend and hiring out to the C-Bar. Seemed like there was no end to the men Catlett was willing to put on his payroll. But even then none of us were smart enough to see what was coming.

"It started on Satiddy, a month ago, the day us folks always drove to the Bend to pick up supplies. Dad hitched his team in front of Hornblower's Store. Kid Cash, and two other C-Bar hands were on the porch. So was Sheriff Mort King. As dad hit the porch them C-Bar hands moved over to block the door, while Cash did the talkin.' He tole dad to carry word back to the colony that Hornblower's warn't open for nester trade no more. Tole him none of the other stores in town would sell to us either.

"That was Catlett's play. When dad said we had to have supplies until our crops came in, or starve, Kid Cash laughed fit to kill. He tole dad that he could pass the word along that any sod-buster ready to pull up stakes, and leave the Bend could buy whatever he'd need.

But the rest of us who would not go—'nada! "Dad said he'd be damned to 'em, and tried to push into the store, and one of them gunnies knocked him flat. Then that cussed sheriff, Mort King, stepped in and arrested dad for disturbin' the peace."

Dusty watched the boy's face twist as he paused for breath. Then he continued in a dull tone. "Dad was shot through the window of his jail cell that night. Catlett and Cash brought us the word next morning; backed up by their gunnies as usual. Told us somethin' more, too. You heard him talk about me bein' out of bounds. Wa'al he laid down the limits we could travel, which included just our strip along the river. Said there'd be patrols outside that boundary and they'd shoot the fust man crossin' their deadline.

"Mister," the boy's blue eyes fixed themselves on Sharron, "have you ever heard anything to beat that? Thar's nigh on seventy-five of us folks countin' women and kids, and we're goin's to starve less'n we give up and pull out. Catlett will win himself a thousand acres or more land that we've developed, and crops worth a pretty fair fortune once they git growed. That was why he waited till we got everything well started afore he jumped us.

"Me, I got desperate last night and snuck out figuring that if mebbe I could draw a bead on Kid Cash and git rid of him the rest of Catlett's tough crew might start fadin' out of the picture and we could break the blockade. I knew Cash rode this Chiquita trail right often, goin' to see some gal livin' back in the Hills here, and that was why I took my shot at you, figurin' yuh was him."

"And a danged good shot it was," Dusty drawled. "An inch higher or lower and we wouldn't be ridin' and talkin.' But it looks like mebbe it warn't quite the right time for ol' Saint Peter to call my number."

"And I'll say amen to that, Mister—"

"Sharron. But most folks call me Bill, or Dusty."

The boy nodded and was silent a moment. Then he mumbled, "Bill, I've been thinking it ain't fitten to pass our troubles on to you. We're scrapin' the bottom of our flour barrels right now, and all our meat is gone. We ketch a few fish once in a while, and we still got our hosses, but if we eat them there won't be nothin' left to work the land. Wust of it is, our menfolks cain't seem to get together on any kind of plan to beat Catlett, with dad gone."

"You're about the only one left in the colony with any gumption!" Dusty drawled. Crowsfeet gathered at the corners of his eyes as he squinted at the youngster. "You had the guts to sneak out here to try and bushwack Kid Cash which is a purty tough chore for any

younk. And I think mebbe you had it figured about right at that. Catlett is mean, and he's crafty as a coyote sneakin' up on a pen of chickens. But you let a good dog come bustin' around the corner of said pen, and mister coyote will hightail it like the danged coward he is.

"Hired gunnies feel things like that. I know because I've done my share of gunchores for different range bosses around this country. But I ain't never sided one that I didn't figure was in the right."

Dusty dropped his voice thoughtfully as he caught a first glimpse of the shining river through a break in the trees ahead of them. "So Gila Bend's got to be shown that Catlett ain't the kingpin he thinks he is, and his crew have got to be made to see that he's gutless without Kid Cash to back him. Get rid of that sawed-off killer, and Catlett's tough hands will start driftin'."

A short, brittle laugh slipped from Bob Mason's lips. "I missed my try," he answered, "and we won't git another. So how you goin' to handle Cash with a bunch of plowmen who ain't got a dozen guns between them?"

Dusty Bill Sharron drew a deep breath. "Sometimes," he told the boy reflectively, "when a gent gits hungry he don't need a gun to get what he wants!"

THE condition of the colony Dusty Bill saw, as he rode through it with Bob Mason, was worse than the youth had claimed. Even the pinch-faced kids peeping out at them from behind their mothers' skirts looked frightened. Sullen men were gathered in small groups talking and arguing.

A tall, slender girl came to the door of one of the soddies as Bob Mason drew up in front of it.

"My sis," the boy said indifferently. "This here is Mr. Sharron, Mary."

The girl's calico dress was bright and clean. Her dark brown hair waved neatly back from her forehead. Her face was oval, and her lips were red, and her eyes were the same steady blue of her brother's. Standing in the doorway there, she made a picture. Dusty Bill was certain he would never forget. If a man had a girl like this to come home to he might not mind plowing all day. But he pushed the thought away. A sawed-off runt of a cowpoke had no right to think of such things.

Mary Mason acknowledged the introduction with an absent nod, then her eyes focussed on her brother. "Bob," she said hurriedly, "thank heaven you're back. The talk's going around that we're going to leave without a fight—give Catlett everything we've put into our colony, all our money, all our hopes. Oh, if dad were here I know the men would never consider it. He'd make them ready to fight

those thieves with pitchforks and scythes—"

"Said implements," Dusty broke in dryly, "ain't wuth much against six-gun lead."

The girl's eyes shuttled to him, and for the first time she really seemed to see Dusty Bill Sharron. "Cash!" he heard her say in a startled breath. "You look like—"

"Which ain't exactly my fault," Dusty grinned.

"You'd pass for him in the dark—"

It was the same thing her brother had said back on the Chiquita Trail, Dusty remembered. "Could be," he murmured, and his thoughts were suddenly far away from the girl.

Bob Mason watched the cowpoke's face grow reflective, and a frown wrinkled his forehead. "Bill—if you're thinkin' of a plan to help us out—" His hand gestured down the narrow street that passed in front of all the soddies.

Dusty turned his thoughtful eyes to follow the boy's wave. Some twenty men were gathered down the way, heads close together in earnest conversation.

"Looks like they're fixin' to do what sis claims," Bob Mason said. "We're whupped, Bill. Catlett's Gila River quarantine has beat us right down to the nub."

Evening shadows were drifting across verdant fields new-sown with grain and other foodstuffs. Everybody in this whole big bend region would prosper when those fields matured. It wasn't a harvest Shane Catlett was going to reap for glory alone.

Dusty passed a palm across his stubbly cheek. "Son, let's you and me ride down to them fellers. I got a proposition to put to 'em."

Distraught, apathetic faces turned toward them as they rode up to the group gathered in the roadway.

"This here is Bill Sharron," Bob Mason introduced Dusty. "Only the luck of God or the devil kept me from killin' him this afternoon, thinkin' he was Kid Cash."

"Looks like him, all right," one of the sodbusters muttered.

"Catlett and Kid Cash heard my shot," the boy was going on, "and come along to take me to jail like they done dad. Would of, too, if Bill hyar hadn't discouraged 'em. So I figger whatever he's got to say might be worth your listenin' time."

Dusty grinned, and the crowsfeet were at the corners of his eyes again giving him that quizzical look. "I ain't got much to say," he drawled. "You fellers want to keep these leetle farms of yours, or yuh want to quit and give 'em to Catlett?"

"That's a damned fool question, Sharron," one grizzled farmer said bluntly. "We want 'em, but we want to see our families eat, too."

"We want peace, and we do not want to fight."

"Sometimes," Dusty drawled, "the lamb has got to turn into a lion and do some tall fightin' for the peace he wants."

"What you got on your mind?" the grizzled sod-buster asked.

"It's going to be night pretty soon," Dusty drawled, "and practically every cuss that's seen me since Bob and I got together has made mention of the fact that I'd pass for Kid Cash in the dark. Wa'al, mebbe I will, and mebbe I won't. We'll see, if you willing to fight for the peace you want."

"Name her," the colony spokesman's voice had gained some warmth.

Dusty nodded. "Kid Cash probably does quite a lot of night ridin', and most likely he keeps a crew at his back." Fire had started to kindle unconsciously in Dusty Bill Sharron's voice. "So that's what I want!" he told them. "A half-dozen of you who think you're a match for hired guns and bought lead. If there's that many of you willing to fight for your wives and kids and farms—step out and I'll lead you through Gatlett's riders into Gila Bend. Before they know what's hit 'em we'll take over every important store on the street, and you can bet the townfolks will back us once we show 'em we ain't a bunch of yellow bellies ready to lay down and yell uncle when Catlett cracks the whip."

"Glory!" young Bob Mason was the first to break the stunned silence. "I got me a rifle and I know how to use it. I'm danged near as big as you, Bill Sharron, and if you think I'm goin' to stay behind you got another guess comin'. Come on you plow-pushers!"

EVERY man had wanted to make the ride. That had been the only trouble. But with Bob Mason's excited advice, Dusty had finally picked a crew. And the plowmen had let the boy have his say without a word, remembering that his dad was dead, buried in a boothill grave.

They'd long since passed the first hurdle—a Catlett rider who'd ordered them to identify themselves, and Dusty had given the man a brief look at himself by the light of a match, and a growled word that any Catlett hand ought to know him.

Now they were close to the outskirts of Gila Bend. Dusty could see the lights of the town

twinkling just ahead of them as they topped a last rise.

"Stick close to me," he ordered the men behind him, "and don't act nervous if we git challenged again. Once inside town bust out a window and climb in anyway. Barricade yourselves, and be ready to lay a cross-fire along the street if it comes to that. Ain't nothin' like honest lead to discourage hired gunslingers. Me'n Bob will light at Horn-blower's."

He led them on again at a rushing run. Confident echoes announced their coming, and a lounging rider rode from the cover of a mesquite tree at the edge of town to throw up his arm. Then, as they approached, Dusty saw the man's arm falter and drop.

"Go on, Cash," he muttered, and Dusty thought that his voice sounded a little strained, but he kept on going up the street with a curt nod.

His men were slipping away to either side now as they approached the main stores. A couple of the buildings were lighted, others were dark. On ahead, Dusty saw horses tethered before the bright façade of a big saloon, and behind the line of structures on the right side of the street, he heard the sudden quick rush of a running mount. The sound brought its own sharp warning of danger to him, even before he heard Bob Mason's strangled, low cry beside him.

"That paint at the Lodestar hitchrail, and the buckskin next it, are bronses I've seen under Kid Cash and Catlett. If they're in town tonight—"

It explained the rush of that horse up the dark alley. The guard had let them pass, and now he was riding to the saloon to warn Catlett and Cash of their coming.

Dusty's spurs rolled on Ranger's flanks, and he curved the big horse toward the bright saloon.

"You cain't go in," Bob Mason shrilled. "If Cash and Catlett are there, they've got men to back 'em. They never ride alone."

Dusty Bill gave the boy a gray glance. "If we don't," he told the youngster quietly, "they'll be out on top of us before our crew can get settled. It won't be much of a fight if that happens."

They were at the hitchrail now, and Dusty was swinging, cat-like, from Ranger's back.

"This is Hell, skipper—my stop. This is where I drop off. Got any message to send to the guy I killed—or just say the boys were askin' for him?" There is a new chapter of our pioneer history being written in American blood in the skies over the world—read THE VALIANT NEVER DIE! by Ray P. Shotwell, in our sister publication, DARE-DEVIL ACES—at your newsstand, January 28!

"You stay here and hold the reins," he directed.

"Hold your own reins!" Bob Mason squalled. "A gun makes all men the same size. I'll back your hand, Bill!"

There was no time to argue. That other horse in the alley had halted its racketing run behind the saloon. Dusty went up across the porch, and his hands were swinging close to his hips as he swept through the batwings.

ANOTHER man was bursting in from the rear as he made his entrance. It was the guard they had passed at the edge of town. Four men were leaning against the bar to the right, and a few others were grouped at tables down the length of the room to the left. But there were just two of them in the whole place that interested Dusty Bill Sharron. One was Kid Cash, his stocky counterpart. The other was Catlett, still wearing his fancy California pants and wide belt.

"Them sod-busters are—" The guard who had come in from the rear got out the three words, before Dusty's chill voice cut him short. "In town," he finished. "And aiming to stay!"

At the sound of his voice, Kid Cash whirled, smooth as a dancer, and Dusty had time to admire the other's composure as both their hands swept simultaneously toward holstered Colts.

Cash was even grinning a little. "I'd hate to think there's another loose as ugly as me!" he said coolly, and then red hell was blasting from the Colts at his hips.

Dusty felt the stab of a bullet through the calf of his left leg, and then his own guns were blazing, a fraction of a second later than the

other's but a fraction more accurately, too, for he had taken the time to elevate the muzzles before opening fire. He saw his lead strike the Kid in the middle and fold him forward over his guns, and then the ugly, sharp bark of another weapon broke through the rumble of Colt fire. Dusty felt the slap of a bullet into the flesh of his shoulder, and through lifting gunsmoke he saw the ugly snout of a derringer Shane Cartlett had flicked from inside his belt.

A Winchester roared almost at his shoulder, so close he felt the prickling burn of powder against his neck, and he saw Catlett blink. The man's lips parted, and he grabbed at the bar for support but there was no strength left in his hands. Slowly he slumped down across the brass rail at the foot of the bar.

"That," Dusty heard a young voice that seemed to have grown suddenly more mature, "is my first man, and it pays for dad. I hope I don't never have to kill another."

"You won't around these," Dusty Bill Sharron told him, and his Colts were swinging to cover the room. "When there ain't no more pay comin' gunnies lose their loyalty mighty fast."

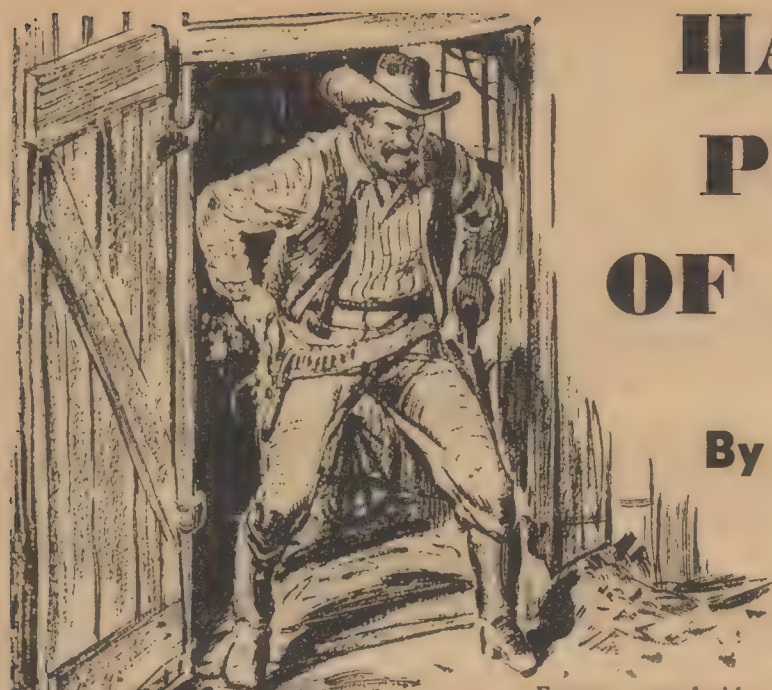
And a voice answered from the back of the room, "You ain't wrong there, mister. I'll be done afore mornin'—"

They'd be gone from Gila Bend themselves before morning to carry back word to harried men and women that the chance they wanted to make a living in peace was theirs again. Yes, they'd be back in the colony and Dusty hoped Mary Mason would make a good nurse because he was sure going to need one before turning in his saddle for a plow.



HALF- PINT OF HELL

By AL STORM



Fayman turned side-
ways.

He had the image of an angel in his brain, a below-the-border song on his lips—and more hell in his gunslick heart than an owlhoot town could tame!

HI FAYMAN sat his jogging dun as unconcernedly as though he were back in Texas making his rounds as city marshal. But a hard blue light burned steadily in the dark depths of his narrowed eyes, and his lean left hand inched back toward the Colt's Bisley .41 that was stowed in the big front pocket of his oversized jeans.

Again he caught the sharp flicker of sunlight reflecting from worn steel, but his



glance did no more than flick across the brush-filled coulee as he scanned the harsh, hot stone hills of New Mexico Territory. Somewhere in their stone folds lay the little town of Riata where outlaw Grizzly James and outlaw Trey Potter were eyeing each other over cocked pistols. And between them lay the thirty thousand dollars in gold dust that Hi Fayman had ridden up from Texas to get.

The fracas-seasoned, young lawman from Texas swayed loosely in the saddle as the trail dropped in wide loops toward the coulee. A worn Army shirt flopped about his shoulders and a too-large Levis buried his wizened frame until he seemed a scrawny kid trying to play man. Even the battered old Mex sombrero dwarfed him by contrast. But Susan Frazier's letter had given him a man-sized job, even though a man didn't stand a show in Riata against the gunhawks Trey Potter and Grizzly James were lining up.

"Pull up, kid They's a slug of lead misery pinin' to salivate your brisket."

Fayman reined in feigned surprise as the harsh command was shouted at him. He jerked on the split ribbons and nearly fell when the big dun reared. Then he sat staring wide-eyed at the shaggy-jowled hombre who stepped out into the trail.

The ambusher pointed a 45-90 at Fayman's head. As Fayman cowered away, the gunny laughed mirthlessly. Cruelty drew the muscles of his mouth into hard lines, and he laughed again as Fayman flinched when he eared back the rifle hammer.

"You ain't big enough to fill a hawk's belly, or I'd spill your guts on the sand."

Still Fayman stared with all the fear he could force himself to show. His off-side heel kept the dun lunging and snorting, and he let his hand stray farther from the .41 in his pocket. His gamble had worked so far: the brush-shooter wasn't going to cut down on a rambling kid.

"Don't shoot, mister . . ." Fayman begged as he fought with the nervous dun. He waved his arm widely. "... I ain't got nothin'."

The rifleman grunted, "You're fifty simoleons to me." Then he took a swift step forward. His knife-shredded lips pressed hard against yellow teeth as he rasped, "What you doing on this road? What's your business?" The rifle was half-raised and slanted so that the big black bore centered on Fayman's blunt nose. "And make this palaver straight!"

Fayman's grulla became even more unmanageable so that he was seldom under the rifle barrel for more than a split second. And the butt of the hidden .41 was again cold against his left palm. A long line of tracks looped backward across the territory to the

Texas cowtown where he had laid aside his Marshal's badge, and every mile of the ride had made him more grimly aware of the odds he was facing. How many rifle barrels were trained on him he had no way of knowing.

"Going to Riata," he gasped from his weaving seat. "... for a friend . . ."

He didn't mention that the friend was pretty Susan Frazier, kid sister to the old miner who had wandered into Riata with an iron trunk of fifteen years pannings and died there. Nor did he mention the wild dreams he sometimes had of asking Susan Frazier to start sharing his life of a city marshal.

His words hit the hulking rifleman with veiled threat. The man's eyes slitted ominously and his lips thinned.

"Just who you aimin' to see in Riata?" he rasped.

Hackles rose on the slighter man's neck. The trail guard was only waiting for his answer before cutting loose with his artillery. And even that wait was stretching his nerves. Fayman's hand was again moving thighward. Obviously one of the outlaw leaders had posted this trail guard, was making certain that the other did not import too many gunhawks. But which? Upon his choice his life depended.

"Grizzly James," Fayman mouthed weakly as the outlaw scowled.

The heavy rifle jerked to the outlaw's thick shoulder, and Fayman saw instantly that he had made a poor guess. Before the gunny could shoot, the little ex-lawman had clamped heels to the dun and leaped him directly at the outlaw. The man dodged to one side. Then, as Fayman was in too close for rifle-shooting, the outlaw lashed out with the gun in a murderous jab.

Fayman saw the blow coming and threw himself low along his mount's neck. The rifle slid across his shoulders and caught in the slack of his big shirt. Half dragged from the saddle, he braced himself and reared back hard. The outlaw was pulled in against the dun's heaving side and Fayman lashed out with a booted foot. There was an ugly sound and the gunny cartwheeled backward.

Fayman slid from the saddle like a lithe, swift shadow and crouched low. A huge .41 jutted business-like from his brown hand as he waited for hell to break loose around him.

THE sterile silence of hushed sands and seared rock hills closed down around him. The fast-running shadow of a zoplite hawk cut across the trail. Nothing else moved. There was no challenging shout or avenging shot. There was only the heat and the sands and the limp body of the out-

law whose mangled mouth and crushed nose were seeping crimson.

Fayman dropped to his haunches finally and began going through the unconscious outlaw's pockets. He kept one eye keenly trained on the serrated skyline, but there was no interruption as he turned a sack of tobacco, two cigar butts, and four poker chips marked in pencil with a trey of spades upon the ground. Not even the man's worn boots or old hat gave evidence as to who he might be.

The Texan's lean fingers moved mechanically as he poured a handful of fine sand down the rifle barrel and into the hammer pit. Trey Potter was already declaring Riata a closed town. Any stranger who showed up would be an immediate object of suspicion. Fayman jacked the lever until the outlaw's 45-90 was hopelessly jammed before he threw it far up the coulee where he had thrown the gunny's belt-gun. He was grinning mirthlessly as he swung back astride the dun. When Trey Potter's renegades were suspicious of an hombre that hombre did some tall talking or fast sloping—if he lived!

The sun had started slipping down upon the blue western crags as the trail unwound to the dun's steady gait. A red glare painted the rock hills ominously until Riata was a scraggly collection of adobe and stone shacks in the shadow of a high, narrow pass. The little Texan came upon it before he knew it and he could not draw back. Hesitation now would be fatal, branding him to all who might be watching the one trail into town.

A long cornhusk smoke took shape in his fingers as he ambled down the slope. The narrow twisted street was deserted, but he could feel the cold, hostile inspection of unseen watchers. He grew limp and easy in the saddle. A low dirge of below-the-border love came to his lips. He was a kid, a gaunt, pint-sized kid who rode an outlaw trail into an outlaw town. He gave no indication that he knew the town reeked of brimstone and was perched on the barbed wire of gun trouble.

A bearded man was fondling a sawed-off shotgun in the alley between two stone buildings. He stared hard at the Texan but made no move to stop him. Hi Fayman nodded, but the man did not smile or nod. A cold breath of ice played across Fayman's spine as he rode past.

"Shagtail, button!" a harsh voice challenged from across the street. "Tend yore business and do yore ridin'!"

Fayman buried his wry grin. The street narrowed and turned and at the bend was a long low adobe saloon. A stone's throw across was a double-storied general store. There was a hint of movement behind the upper windows. At the lower end of the

street was the only other two-storied building in town. Susan Frazier's letter had mentioned that—a hotel.

The saloon suddenly spilled three lean-jawed gunhawks who spread out and stood eyeing him. Fayman edged over and pulled in at the empty hitchrail. As he slid to the ground they moved aside even more and then closed in behind him as he made for the batwing doors.

Two men stood at the bar, but they moved away as the little Texan entered. A flashily dressed dude gambler riffled cards at a back table. All watched without words, and a strained tension pulled at Fayman's nerves.

A SAG-BELLIED barkeep came down the pine-slab bar, rolling like a lumber wagon. "What'll it be, kid?"

One of the gunmen slouched directly in front of the door.

"How come nobody's on the street?" Fayman asked casually. His voice grew a little shrill. "You're not expectin' Indians?"

Somebody laughed thickly. Then the sound stopped and the saloon was again hushed and charged. Fayman saw the laughter's reflection in the bar mirror. It wasn't a face to give a kid pleasant dreams.

The barman scowled. "What you want, kid?"

Fayman reached into his voluminous pants and dragged out a handful of small change. The four poker chips loomed up like granite boulders in his hand. He couldn't hide them now. And Fayman noticed from the corner of his eye how the barman started and drew back when he saw the chips. One of the gunmen saw them, too. He muttered something and the gambler got to his feet with a flowing easy speed.

"Where'd you get those chips?" the gambler asked.

Fayman froze at sound of the venom in the man's tones. He stood idly at the bar, but beneath the loosely wrapped shirt his shoulder muscles flexed and grew relaxed for trouble. He watched the barkeep before him and the man reflected in the mirror. He dared not turn around or the barkeep could smash his skull with a bungstarter. And he could not draw fast enough while he stood with his back to the gambler. A look of hate swept through the barkeep's slitted eyes as he heard the little Texan humming softly to himself.

A running horse sounded far up the trail. It came hi-tailing into Riata and pulled in before the saloon. A man shouted gruffly, but no one in the saloon looked up. None moved while the deadly play took shape.

"Where'd you get those chips?" the gambler repeated slowly.

"Grizzly James," the barkeep muttered.

The thin gambler shook his head. "Let him do his own talking."

Fayman put his hands against the bar top and shoved himself back a few inches. In the dirty mirror he held the burning stare of the gambler, and he could see the wrath burning in the small black eyes. The gambler's right hand was out of sight.

"We'll hoss trade," Fayman said. "You tell me where the Palmer House Hotel is and I'll spill my guts about those chips."

The saloon was suddenly tomb-quiet, and Fayman saw that he had over-played his hand. The gambler's pinched face washed of color. One of the gunmen near the door half drew his gun. No half-pint kid from Texas was supposed to know anything about the Palmer House Hotel or that iron box of gold dust—not unless he was taking sides.

"I'll tell you!" a hoarse voice raged as the batwing doors snapped open. "Let me get that skinny button and I'll yank his damned ribs out his nose!"

Hi Fayman whirled and dropped to his knees. The trail guard made for him with red murder glowing in his pig eyes. Then Fayman whipped into action. He lunged sideways and forward, his hidden .41 flashing into the open with a blurring stab of blued steel. The hard barrel whacked across the trail guard's kneecap, came up and down to rake the reeling outlaw across the side of the head. The big man crumpled and fell limply.

"I'm a little light for fist work," Fayman repeated slowly. The big .41 dangled from the arm held close to his side. He eyed the ring of thunderstruck outlaws who were just beginning to comprehend the lightning devastation they had witnessed. "I don't look for fist trouble."

The lean gambler eyed the little Texan's defiance with a coldly glinting eye.

"Stranger?" he purred.

FAYMAN braced his right arm against the bar. "To some—to some not so strange. I'm Texas," he said. He shoved the .41 deep into his Levis pocket, and from the gambler's mirthless twist of lips he knew that the gambler had seen that the .41 was still at full cock.

"I'm Trey Potter," the gambler said after a space. "And when the smoke clears I'm king-pin of this town. He was one of my men." Potter kicked the fallen trail guard. "You got his chips. They're bounty; fifty simoleons for each scalp that rode toward Riata looking for trouble." The gambler's inscrutable gaze shifted over the roomy togs of the Texan.

"Gunswift," he mused half mockingly.

They's gold for prospectors hereabouts. And they's hombres willin' to pay plenty to get through this pass into the mountains. It's the only way in."

He nodded toward the hulking barkeep. "Cash those chips; they're yours."

Fayman shook his head. The gambler's eyes grew set and coldly brilliant, and Fayman saw that he was again the object of suspicion.

"You got another chance, kid," Potter clipped coldly. "Throw in and you'll get along. Unless you are riding for Grizzly James!"

Hi Fayman tried a weak grin, but it was no go. Mention of Grizzly James riled this gun crew into killing mood. And they made no bones about their intentions.

"I'm from Texas," Fayman explained slowly. "I don't savvy this Grizzly James talk. I got no business with him. My business is at the Palmer House Hotel."

Trey Potter held Fayman with a baleful glare for a long time. Behind the pinched, set mask of his face his thoughts were running high. But only the flat, black shine of his eyes betrayed it. Then he jerked his head toward the street. "Tend that business," he challenged.

Potter's gunmen moved clear at the nod, and Fayman found a path made for him. He moved slowly toward the street and then was standing so that the slanting sun was full in his face. At the far edge of the plank walk he turned toward the saloon and said something in a low tone. That done, he vaulted into the saddle and moved around the bend in the street and toward the two-story Palmer House Hotel. Another saloon, the Oasis, lay on the other side of the street and men crowded the narrow, deep-set windows to watch.

Four hard-eyed hombres with wary eyes lolled under the hotel awning. They watched as Fayman approached, but they did not move aside. One laughed briefly at the Texan's huge Mex hat, but it wasn't a friendly laugh and none of the others joined in. They weren't friendly men. The little ex-marshal could see that in the way they eyed each other and made casually certain that their backs were to solid adobe wall or pine awning pillar.

Only their eyes followed him as he dismounted and strode past them on into the low, dim hotel lobby.

A pale, pimply-faced kid watched him, and upon coming closer Fayman could see stark terror in the kid's distended eyes. The sight gave the little Texan a swift stab of warning.

"I want the key to the room Charley Frazier took some six months ago," he said. "The number is two-o-three."

THE kid paled and seemed about to drop behind the counter. He rolled his eyes toward the front door and his hands shook as he braced himself against the counter top. "You—the money—" he gasped. "You're—"

Hi Fayman reached out quickly and took the lad by the arm. They were nearly of a size, but years had added much to the courage and self-reliance of the Texan. And he knew, too, that he had but a few hours in which to make his play. His presence was known and within the narrowing span of that day he would either succeed or die—

Maybe both.

"Easy," Fayman soothed as he squeezed the lad's bony shoulder. "This ain't no stick-up. I got a letter authorizing you to turn the key over to me."

With a sob of panic the kid tore loose from Fayman's grasp and dropped flat to the floor. Fayman whirled and sprang aside like a surprised cougar. Three of the hombres he had seen on the street now stood in the doorway. They stood watching him without moving, confident. Behind them the street was a long line of light against which other men stood out starkly.

"Beat it, bub," one of the three said stiffly. "We ain't decided who gets that gold yet. But it ain't you."

"That's right," another voice chimed in from a side door that led back under the stairs somewhere. "It ain't going to be either of you."

Another small knot of men were grouped there, but fanned out so that they could dig fast for their pistols should the need arise. Their eyes skipped over the one little Texan and clashed with the men in the front door. Neither side moved. Finally Fayman raised his hands shoulder high. Still they paid him no attention, and he walked out the front door and across the walk.

The dun ambled back up the street slowly as Fayman gently lowered his hands and picked up the reins.

A DEAD silence fell as he shouldered his way into the Oasis Saloon, but he ignored it. Shoving his big hat back, he bellied up to the bar.

"Whiskey," he said, hoping that none of Trey Potter's bunch were in the room. It was a long gamble, but he had to play it that way. When it got around who he was and what he wanted, his number would be up. "Who's Trey Potter? And what riles him so about that hotel across the street?"

A bearded giant that topped six feet by half a head leaned over him. "That don't go, son," he hissed. "We seen you slope into town and drop in down the street. You shouldn't a kept

talking after you left Potter's. That showed which side the fence you was ridin'."

Fayman felt his heart lurch as he looked up at the huge Goliath. He'd stepped into it right. Trey Potter's men wouldn't be in the Oasis because the Oasis was the other side. And this bearded giant was the ill-famed Grizzly James.

"That's right, son," Grizzly James repeated. "You guessed it. And we guessed you, just before you tried that bluff over at the hotel."

Hi Fayman snapped hotly, "That was no bluff!"

For a moment the bearded outlaw leader stood in stunned surprise. His blood-shot eyes ran over the motley crowd of gunhawks and hired killers he had grouped about him. Then he looked down at the lone, pint-sized little jasper that had hotly tossed the challenge right back into his huge, tobacco-stained teeth.

"Hit the grit and you'll see the stars to-night," he said clamy, as though half annoyed by a pestering fly. "Stay after sundown and you'll quit seeing."

Fayman carefully put his whiskey back on the bar. They watched him. Tension drew lips thin and set tight against locked teeth. No one breathed.

"Pegged for a Trey Potter gunhawk, am I?" Fayman whispered. "If I wear that brand, why you lettin' me ride? Scared?"

Somebody started cursing hoarsely, but no one cut loose. And Fayman saw that he had guessed it right. They were scared. The first gun that cut loose would tip the scales on a bucket full of hell, and neither side was strong enough to walk away with the gold. It would be a blood-spattered tossup. Each side would shoot the other into ribbons, and both sides knew it.

Fayman spread his hands. He held his arms clear of his sides and started toward the door. They didn't part for him. The death ring held tight, and he saw that they aimed to do something about his lip-shooting.

"I'm leaving Riata tonight," Fayman said, hoping grimly that he *would* be able to leave Riata that night. "And I ain't stringing with Trey Potter. That's the straight goods."

"You've got an hour."

The ring opened and Fayman walked through the door. His back muscles itched but no one pulled down on him. The bearded Oasis gunboss walked right behind him.

"I'm cutting you down the next time we meet," Grizzly James promised. "I don't like smart kids with slick guns. I don't like you. Write your own ticket now, but the next time—"

Fayman crouched on the balls of his feet. For a moment he fought against an unholy desire to whirl and gun-beef the huge outlaw. But he knew that he wouldn't live to cross the

street. Susan Frazier would never get her brother's gold when Trey Potter and Grizzly James finally started smoking each other up. It was for her, he told himself grimly, as he walked to his dun—it was only for her that he held off.

As he stepped into the saddle, Fayman saw the loungers at the hotel idly watching him again. It was a grimly sardonic game. Death stood about in every shadow, but never did it do more than show itself threateningly. The two outlaw gangs stood eye to eye and shoulder to shoulder, and neither of them gave the Texan more than a rough shake-off. And neither of them would let him get close to the Palmer House Hotel again.

HIS brow furrowed, Fayman rode back up the street. At the bend he stopped. Trey Potter stood just outside the door. A fishy-eyed two-gunner stood beside him. They stopped talking as Fayman rode up. Neither answered his grin. And suddenly Hi Fayman wasn't grinning. He knew that two-gunner. It was Fish-eye Slade, the deadliest gunman west of Omaha.

"Make your play, Fayman," Trey Potter snarled. "Fish-eye told me about you. You've cut yourself into a man's game. Drag your cutters if you want to play!"

Kill-urge burned redly in Potter's black eyes. They watched and they waited, a deadly, cold-blooded pair of killers who were lightning with their irons. Fayman froze. One sharp breath would start them moving. They knew he wasn't a part of Grizzly James' outfit. His death wouldn't start Grizzly James howling for blood.

"Till sundown," Trey Potter suddenly let down. "Shag before then. Riata is cleaning house—you're first!"

Fayman stood while the fire of his pulse sent little shivers through his splayed fingers. Trey Potter had him right. Against Fish-eye, Trey Potter, and the rest of the kill-wolves lurking just inside the saloon doors the devil himself wouldn't have a chance.

"Through the gap, *amigo*," Fish-eye said. "You're not bringing any posse in here."

Fayman followed his jerked thumb. Beyond the narrow pass lay only the impassible wilds of the Ladrone mountains. And a lawman there lived only until it became known that he was a lawman. Fayman would find no posse in the Ladrone, and Riata plugged the only exit.

"Make your choice, *amigo*," Fish-eye insisted.

Fayman turned slowly and rode down the narrow street toward the Palmer House Hotel and the dark gap that showed in the rock hills beyond. Fish-eye stood watching him. The little Texan slouched in the saddle and

sang slowly of dark-eyes and glowing loves that flourish below the border.

As he rode past the hotel, the song was abruptly swallowed. Spurs shot home, and the dun leaped ahead. The sudden rush of air whipped the Mex hat from Fayman's head and half choked him as the pull cut the choke-string into his throat.

Pounding across the street he drove the big dun into a narrow slit between the Palmer House Hotel and an old stage station. Adobe dirt brushed both knees as the big mount thundered through. A startled yell echoed from the street behind. Then the dun was out into the dim glow of the fading afternoon, and ahead were the sheds and corrals of the hotel. Hi Fayman shot a quick glance along what he could see of the alley but no one was in sight.

THE Texan leaped to the ground and legged it toward the hotel back door.

It gave into a low dim kitchen. Fayman paused for a moment and listened to the pound of bootheels on the plank walk somewhere outside the hotel. He heard a man yell again but the words blurred until he could not make them out.

There wasn't a split second to spare. The town knew that he had cut around the hotel. They'd know why the minute they stopped to figure it out. Fayman wasn't waiting.

Huge pants legs swishing, he darted across the kitchen. As he emerged into the lobby, the pimply-faced kid squawked and dropped. The sound drew attention from the street, and Fayman cursed as he made for the stairs. Halfway up, the stairs doubled back over themselves. A man yelled, and Fayman flopped low on the landing. A shot rattled things in the lobby. A streak of lead fanned the air in front of Fayman's face. Before he could thumb a reply, the shooter darted back out into the street.

The upper hall was long and glaring with light that streamed in from a door that opened to an outside stairway. It rang a warning gong in the Texan's mind. That outside door had been padlocked when he saw it before. He'd thought of trying to sneak up that way. Now it was open.

A heavy-footed hombre started running across the lobby down below. Fayman caught the pounding racket of the footsteps. Then a thundering shotgun blast shook the building, and the pounding stopped. Something heavy and soft hit the counter like a sack of meal.

Room two-o-three was locked with a heavy padlock. Fayman pried with his six-gun but the hasp was set solid. He braced his feet and strained until his ears rang and his eyes bulged from their sockets, but the lock refused to give. Then a shot tore up

through the floor within inches of his right foot. Fayman flung himself back across the hall just before another handful of splinters splintered where he had been standing. Somebody down below was trying to keep him away from that door until he could be dealt with. And they knew where to shoot.

The first slug from the Bisley .41 spun the padlock half around. The second left it a twisted wreck. Then hunching his shoulder, the little Texan charged across the narrow hall and hit the door. It gave and he fell into a room that was dark and hot with the stench of a room long closed in hot weather.

Surging to his feet, Fayman leaped across the room and drew back the shade. The Oasis Saloon had spilled its gun crew and, as he watched, they started fanning out along the street. Then one of them saw him in the window and spiked a quick shot.

Glass splintered in the little ex-marshal's face as he ducked away. The iron box was chained to an iron bedstead with a short heavy length of chain. It took another two shots to spring the padlock, and the box pulled at his shoulder as he hefted it. It was a strong eighty pounds of gold dust and iron. The window shade danced with a peppering of holes, and Fayman knew that even to peer out would be fatal. He would have to go down the stairs again. He knew that as his only hope, and as he reloaded he knew how slender even that hope was.

GRABBING the length of chain he dragged the iron box toward the hall door. A thumb-sized hole appeared on a level with his eyes as he peered out, and he saw a man blocking the outside door. His .41 Bisley cut loose with a rolling double shot and the man was down.

"Watch that blasted side door," Grizzly James bawled from the street front. "Don't let him out and we'll pinch that half-pint hellion between us."

The door slammed shut, and Fayman caught the stealthy rasp of the padlock being fastened. He backed into room two-o-three again. The shade was a tattered mess of ribbons through which the setting sun poured a blood-red light. And through the shattered shade Fayman caught sight of something that tamped a final shovel-full of sand on his grave. Trey Potter and Fish-eye stood down the street a bare sixty yards.

A heavy rifle suddenly threw a slug through the window from a roof across the street. A second shot puffed dust from a far corner beyond the bed. They were searching him out as they would a cornered lobo.

Treed, Fayman sought desperately for an out. The window was death; the hall—suddenly he saw that the hall was no longer

dim. Reloading feverishly, he inched toward the door. Then with a rush he was out of the room and slamming shots at the surging pack of men who were creeping in the side door. Lead picked ravelings from his shirt and burned across his big Levis. Another thumped the big hat behind his shoulders.

Then the doorway was clear; the door held open by a limp dark figure.

The lobby downstairs sounded with a pound of boots that came up the stairs. A gun-barrel inched around the corner of the stairway. Fayman waited, tilting his own .41. Then an ear and an eye showed over the sixgun and he cut loose. The face vanished. There was a shrill yell.

The trapped Texan poked fresh loads into the smoking Bisley and cursed the lack of sense that had landed him in this spot. Both outlaw gangs were pitched for a showdown fight, but neither side would fight to help a swell-headed kid who had let his guns get him into a pocket. But now that he was holding onto Charley Frazier's gold, both were ready to pitch in on him!

Fayman saw grimly that the little errand for Susan Frazier had pinched him in the crack for certain. And this time he wouldn't be able to stall by playing kid. His guns packed man-sized lead, and the men ahead were out to still those guns.

Gingerly he looked out the room window again. Trey Potter and Fish-eye stood in the center of the narrow street. The bull-necked trail guard was loading a rifle and standing under an awning a few doors down. Behind them, on both sides of the street, the Trey Potter gang stood warily, waiting until their leader gave them the signal to cut loose.

Texas seemed terribly far distant to Fayman at the moment. Even should his luck hold out and allow him to elude Grizzly James, he would still have Trey Potter and Fish-eye to face. It was as grim and plain as the bullet holes in the ruined window shade. Potter wasn't holding off to save any Texas skin; he was holding his fire until he could see a quick means of getting that iron box of gold dust into his own hands without risking a shootfest with Grizzly James.

Fayman saw that in the studied calm of the gambler's waiting. And each passing second added to the Texan's peril. When Trey Potter finally decided on a move and started his outlaw guns thundering. . . .

THE grim seconds ticked off and no sound came from below. Hi Fayman hefted the iron box of gold dust again. He could toss it out into the street and sneak out the back way while the Riata gunwolves fought for the gold. But that would have been selling Susan Frazier's faith in him.

Then a wild desperate scheme popped into his head like a stunning salvo of rifle slugs. Wild and desperate but twisted with one thin lead of hope.

Jumping to the window, Hi Fayman jerked the shade aside and cleared the glass splinters from the frame with one quick sweep of his gun barrel.

"Hi, Trey Potter!" he bellowed. "I got this end covered like you said. You and Fish-eye come in the front. We got Grizzly James in a trap!"

Trey Potter jerked and looked up. The beefy trail guard who had already tasted Fayman's fight methods slammed his rifle to his shoulder, but a wad of Oasis outlaw lead cut him down before he could fire. Grizzly James hadn't let his rival move unnoticed.

A hoarse bellow of rage sounded through the hotel, followed by a thundering blast of gunfire as the Oasis gunmob turned their fire toward Trey Potter's advancing crew. The road dust suddenly dimpled and puffed about Trey Potter and Fish-eye. Fayman ducked from the window. And as he scooped up the iron box, his ears caught the rolling death-chant of Fish-eye's guns going into action.

A hasty glance showed the Texan that the hall was clear. He raced as lightly as the iron box would let him along the plank floor toward the outside stairway door. No one was in sight, and for a brief moment the little Texan allowed a wry grin to twist his lips.

Grizzly James had no desire to have Trey Potter's gunhawks slinking along behind his back. He'd kept them under surveillance and when Hi Fayman yelled he cut loose. The heavy adobe hotel rumbled with shot-tipped flame as the two gangs clashed in the shoot-down that had been months in building up.

THE little Texan was more than half-way down the stairs when he heard a startled yell from across the street. He ducked low and scrambled under the railing, falling to the solid earth below.

Grizzly James had left some of his gang to hold the Oasis Saloon, and it was this bunch that saw him. Two of them ventured out into the street, running half-bent over; but a savage thunder of gunfire from Potter's renegades dropped one of them into the dust and forced the other to run back. He ducked into a small saddle shop and for a while held them with a slow steady fire from there.

Hi Fayman took a fresh grip on the chain. Then, bracing his legs, he started a series of long leaps that carried him along the blank hotel wall and around the back corner. No one was in sight. His dun was still standing, and as he stared along the back lots another rolling splatter of shooting sounded from the front street.

Fayman threw the heavy iron box across the saddle and hitched the chain about the high horn.

"I didn't think you was gonna fly out of Riata with that gold dust, yunker," a hoarse voice raged from behind. "And I knew it for sure when I spotted your dun here. I knew you'd come to it."

Hi Fayman whirled in startled confusion and came to earth on the balls of his feet facing the hotel shed. Grizzly James filled the shed door from top to bottom and from side to side. Huge, ham-like hands were wrapped about outlaw sixguns.

"I said the next time I saw you," the outlaw leader bellowed. "This is it!"

He jerked suddenly and Fayman swayed sideways and turned the narrow way of his body to the killer. His left hand chopped down and blurred up spitting blue-red flame. The outlaw grunted and staggered back as .41 lead ate into his gigantic chest. Then, once more, he lifted his own guns and aimed them slowly. Fayman triggered again, twice—till his gun clicked empty. Still the huge outlaw stayed on his feet and pointed his heavy belt guns.

Then the incredible strength melted, and Grizzly James pitched stiffly forward on his still twisted face.

Fayman kicked the unfired sixguns away from the huge limp hands as he leaped astride the big dun. Threading his way behind the shed and along the hotel corral, he was suddenly in the open with a straight run along the backs of the Riata buildings. Far ahead he could see the rise and pitch of the hills where the trail looped down toward the gap and town.

Barely daring to hope, he put the dun down the littered lots behind Riata's winding street. Just when he was beginning to believe that he had escaped unnoticed, a rifle slug burned its eerie song past his ears. He twisted in the saddle. An Oasis rifleman was on the saddle shop roof and bracing himself for another shot. And even in that split-second while Fayman's head was turned back over his shoulder, he saw the rifleman throw up his hands and pitch head foremost over the roof. Some one of Trey Potter's gunmen had scored.

Then the last of the adobe shacks fell behind, and Hi Fayman felt the sands of open hill country under the dun's flashing hoofs. Gun thunder still rumbled from Riata as Trey Potter and the last of the Grizzly James gang fought it out. But that didn't matter to Fayman. He was fast on his way toward a little cowtown in Texas, and a young lady named Susan Frazier. And he grinned like a pint-sized school kid as he reached down and patted the heavy iron box of gold dust.

ISAAC C. PARKER— THE HANGING JUDGE

"There is no Sunday west of St. Louis—no God west of Fort Smith!"



By
GLENN SHIRLEY

THE hangman adjusted the knot behind the prisoner's left ear, then mopped drops of perspiration from his shiny pate on a soiled bandanna and glanced down the thirteen steps at the two thousand sweating persons who packed the small yards inside the grim stone walls of abandoned Fort Smith. It was August and hot—hotter than hell!

Every side of the fort was lined with wagons, buggies and saddle horses. Many of the crowd had come on foot. The whole river country had turned out to see the gruesome spectacle of the first human body to drop through the trap of the newly erected gallows. The man was John Childers. His crime had been murder.

The hangman's voice rose: "You will be granted a reprieve to name your accomplices, Childers."

The hubbub of voices died to a sudden, hushed silence. Dust and tobacco smoke hung heavy in the air. The crowd waited tensely.

The prisoner's eyes jerked over them. Among them he recognized many of his companions in crime, but he only waved them farewell with a general sweep of his hand. To the hangman's offer, he replied:

"Yuh brought me out here to hang me,

didn't yuh? Then why the hell don't we get it over with!"

The hangman pulled the lever. Childers' body shot down. Three minutes later he was pronounced dead.

This began the bitter battle that was to rage for more than two red decades between the forces of evil in Oklahoma and the austere, white-haired Judge Isaac C. Parker who represented the only law west of Fort Smith.

His famous court pitched its first shadow across the Oklahoma country when Congress passed the Indian Jurisdiction Act of 1834. This act attached the territory to the federal judicial district of Arkansas and clothed the U. S. District Court at Fort Smith with original jurisdiction in all federal cases, with the exception of crimes committed by one Indian against the person or property of another.

With the discovery of gold in California and the gathering of thousands of adventurers on the border to march up the South Canadian river through the red man's land under military escort, the white population increased so that Congress, in March, 1851, divided Arkansas into two federal districts, the Western including the enormous wild area west to the Colorado line—and No Man's Land.

The famous court was, in the beginning, presided over by Judge Daniel Ringo, who likewise was judge of the Eastern Arkansas district. It received the first judge for its exclusive use in 1865, in the person of Henry C. Caldwell. But Caldwell made little use of its power, dealing principally with whiskey, confiscation of property and treason following the Civil War.

In 1872 he was succeeded by a young lawyer named William Story. Story reigned short of fourteen months. His tenure was climaxed with charges of incompetency, corruption and bribery, and in July, 1874, he resigned to avoid impeachment proceedings in Congress.

Congress was in favor, at the time, of abolishing the court entirely, but railroad building had suddenly thrust itself into the Oklahoma situation.

In 1871 the Atlantic and Pacific railroad crawled out of Missouri into the northeastern corner of the country. In 1875 the Missouri, Kansas and Texas railroad thrust its twin ribbons of steel across Red River north to the Kansas line.

UNDER treaties with the Five Civilized Tribes no whites, except artisans and inter-married Indian citizens, were allowed in the area. But whites were now entered as legal residents as railroad employes, their presence protected by the United States government.

Motelkeepers, barbers, livery stable oper-

ators and others were classified as "traders" and permitted to carry on their business in the country if they procured a federal license and paid a tax to the tribal treasuries. The United States Indian office also held that legal white residents in railroad towns could sell or bequeath a right of occupancy to business or resident lots to other white men.

The white city builders poured in. The Indians protested, and in various instances soldiers were called to quell riots. Tough railroad camps and towns sprang up all along the lines.

This march of civilization and the primitive condition of the country attracted the cream of the frontier badmen. The corrupt element that assembled from all the other states found this country an ideal refuge. Oklahoma soon became infested with hundreds of men who were stained with crime, and the situation only intensified under the reign of Judge Story.

Renegade gangs swept pell-mell into the settlements, yelling like Indians, their six-shooters spouting lead. While men cursed bitterly their helplessness under the guns of the marauding army, the towns were ransacked, one by one. The safes in the stores of merchants offered good pickings, for there were no banks until 1895. In some cases, fiendish crimes were committed on lone settlers within a short radius of the towns. Gangs also terrorized the border states of Kansas and Texas, stole horses, raided ranches, pillaged and murdered.

Some of these outlaws were rough livers who had stepped across the border into crime with little effort when the opportunity presented itself.

Among them were desperate men like the Dalton boys, Bill Doolin, Dick Broadwell and Henry Starr.

Others like Bill Raidler, Charlie Pierce and Bitter Creek were killers by instinct and long habit. Many were simply looters like the Cooks, the Glass gang, the Rufus Buck outlaws, and Wesley Barnett, a young Creek outlaw who had organized a gang engaged in liquor dealing and thievery.

Their savagery flaunted itself brazenly. It seemed that every white man, negro and half-breed that came into the country was a criminal in the state from which he came. Oklahoma's iniquitous reputation soon gave rise to the phrase—"There is no Sunday west of St. Louis—no God west of Fort Smith."

And there was much truth in the saying, for when Judge Isaac C. Parker stepped to the bench to become ruler of the vast legal kingdom, no worse breeding place for Satan's own existed on the outposts of the Western frontier.

In his hands lay the country's salvation.

THE old log structure which had served as a federal jail was immediately replaced by a jail built of brick. The Judge took up chambers in the old stone commissary building. Three hundred feet away, on the site formerly occupied by the fort's powder magazine, he constructed the great gallows which had the capacity of simultaneously launching twelve souls into eternity.

His first official act was to issue writs for the members of the most notorious gangs and ordered the deputy United States marshals to bring them in, alive or dead.

That was a big order in those days. But the marshals were straight-shooting, courageous men bred to the craft of the plains and had been picked for the tough assignment. Men like Bill Smith, Bill Tilghman, Frank Jones, Red Lucas, Heck Thomas, Morgan Rutherford and many others whose names soon became known and heartily feared the length and breadth of the territory.

Fully cognizant of the seriousness of their responsibilities, they ranged westward over eight thousand square miles of unbroken prairies, fording creeks and rivers, camping on high ground under the stars and eating with their Winchesters across their laps—for the outlaws knew every trail and hideout in this trackless country and were eager to kill their most deadly enemy—the peace officer.

Although their progress was cautious and greatly hindered, the marshals started sending many of the renegades to hell by way of Fort Smith. The outlaws fought it out often with guns blazing and a snarl on their lips, but the marshals succeeded in bringing in most of

them on the hoof. Frequently they came in by the wagon load, all fastened together with trace chains. Once Bill Tilghman and Heck Thomas surprised Judge Parker with forty-one prisoners, nine of whom were sentenced to death.

But in many instances the marshals were not the quicker on the draw. Sixty-nine of them were killed in the line of duty, and some of them bushwacked and left on the prairies in unmarked graves.

Judge Parker's court became the most relentless court in all the history of the West. He opened it on May 10, 1875, and on the morning of June 26, pronounced death sentences upon eight men who were simultaneously brought before him, convicted of murder.

When he finished imposing the sentences of death, he hung his great head in remorse.

"I do not desire to hang you men," he said. "It is the law. Avarice has so poisoned your minds that civil war concerns you more than criminal law for the protection of life, limb and virtue."

In his first term of court, eighteen murder cases came before him, and fifteen men were sent to the gallows. At one time during the reign, the jail at Fort Smith housed fifty-nine prisoners awaiting hanging.

The gallows was never taxed to capacity. The most men ever hanged on one occasion was a half-dozen, but single and double hangings became so numerous that they no longer attracted any attention. George Maledon, who jerked the lever that plunged sixty men to eternity, cracked under the strain and retired.

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MARCH

SLOWLY the toils of the law were closing in.

Bill Dalton's last hiding place was discovered, and he was killed while trying to escape. Charley Pierce and Bitter Creek were slain by two farmers. Doolin attempted to escape to New Mexico, but died under a blast of rifle bullets when he was intercepted by Heck Thomas.

Bill Raidler's hideout was located in "The Osage," a wild region of hills and caves southeast of Coffeyville below the Kansas line. He sent word to Tilghman to come get him.

Tilghman rode into the hideout and ordered the bandit to throw up his hands. Raidler's gun jerked up instead, and Tilghman poured a heavy charge of buckshot into the outlaw's belly.

Belle Starr had allied herself with the Jameses and the Youngers and took up abode on the ranch of Tom Starr, the Cherokee. Her renegade band specialized in raiding cattle drives and horse stealing. Marshals made the section hot, and she shifted her seat of operations to Younger's Bend on the Canadian. A short while later she was ambushed by a fugitive gunman she had obliged and who later suspected her of betraying his whereabouts to the law.

Cherokee Bill killed principally for the love of shedding blood. He was only eighteen years old and credited with six murders and scores of robberies when his career was brought to an abrupt end on the rope at Fort Smith.

The Rufus Buck gang was shattered in a battle with Morgan Rutherford's posse. The Cook gang ran into eight deputy marshals at Half Way House on Fourteen Mile Creek.

Dick Broadwell was with the Daltons that fatal day at Coffeyville. He ran from the bank into a hell of rifle lead.

The fight was drawing to a close. Judge Parker had docketed over 13,000 cases and imposed sentences on more than 9,000 criminals.

Of the 300 tried for crimes punishable by death, 172 had been sentenced to the rope, and eighty-eight of them hanged. Undoubtedly he sentenced more convicted criminals to death than any other single magistrate in the annals of American courts and judiciary. His reputation as a "hanging judge" spread across the nation and struck terror in the hearts of law violators throughout the land.

For fifteen years, counting from the day he stepped to the helm and took the fate of civilization's outpost in strong and willing hands, there had been no appeal from his court in criminal matters.

Then Congress suddenly provided that after May 1, 1889, the right of appeal to the United

States Supreme Court lie in all cases where the punishment was death.

Judge Parker was angered and piqued. His court had not always been infallible in its rulings, but he had exercised the final say in the fate of offenders for so long that he was unwilling for even the Supreme Court to share his responsibility.

It was not until ten more men had been sentenced to be hanged that an attorney dared to appeal a case.

Henry Starr, professional bank robber, was brought in and sentenced to the scaffold for the killing of Floyd Wilson, a railroad detective.

His attorney took out a writ, and the Supreme Court reversed and remanded the case on the mitigating circumstances that Starr killed Wilson in an open fight after the detective had fired upon him. In the fall of 1895, Starr was tried again and sentenced to hang.

His case went back to the Supreme Court on appeal and sixteen months later he was again granted a new hearing.

JUDGE PARKER blew up completely. Newspapers blazoned his dispute with Justice White. Bitter words were used, and the upshot of the quarrel was that Judge Parker accused Justice White of lack of knowledge of the law. It was rumored that friends of the justice got the ear of Congress, for almost immediately Judge Parker found himself being stripped of his kingly jurisdiction.

The northwest one-fourth of the Indian country was annexed to the United States judicial district of Kansas, giving the courts at Wichita and Fort Scott exclusive jurisdiction. Under a companion clause of the Act the southwest one-fourth of Oklahoma was attached to the northern judicial district of Texas with the federal district court at Graham.

Within three years Judge Parker's authority had been reduced to a handful of counties in western Arkansas.

Judge Parker's white beard sunk on his chest.

He had taken great pride in wresting from the legion of the lawless a country that was shortly to become a great state. The crumbling of his great legal empire broke his heart. When, on September 1, 1896, the court crier announced that "the Honorable district court of the United States for the western district of Arkansas, having criminal jurisdiction over Oklahoma is now adjourned, forever," Judge Parker took to his bed with a disease for which there was no cure. Two months and two weeks later, he was dead.

HOT LEAD SHOWDOWN



It was now or never!

By

LOGAN C. CLAYBOURNE

VIC JOHNSON rode into Sage Forks about four o'clock that afternoon. Sheriff Ira Connally gaped in surprise, then stepped quickly into his office. He reappeared with a shotgun cradled in the crook of his arm.

"I won't have no shooting on the main street of this town!" he bawled, and swung the shotgun around to emphasize his words.

The tall man who'd been lounging in front of the Drover Saloon shrugged his shoulders

and stepped inside. Vic Johnson rode on to the sheriff's office and dismounted. He eyed the shotgun.

"Ain't exactly a brass band, but then Sage Forks never was much on greeting its prodigal sons."

"Get inside my office!" The sheriff was still watching the saloon, and also keeping an eye on Vic's gun hand. He followed him in. "What're you doing back in town?" he snapped.

Vic looked quizzically at the lawman. There was a pallor on Vic's face put there by long weeks in bed recovering from gunshot wounds. "A fine way to treat somebody you figured was dead," he said.

"Greeting you is like shaking hands with trouble," the lawman said. "Besides, I figured you were still alive. I been watching Martha Dane."

"Purty, ain't she?" Vic asked.

Connaly ignored that. "When're you leavin' town?"

"Wasn't figuring on it." Vic said easily. "Sage Forks is home to me. I came back to do a chore; then I'll settle down here again."

"If you think you're coming back here and

A few people spoke, most just stared in silence.

Vic knew what they were thinking. They thought that he was a man come back from the dead, that he'd died the same night Chuck Dane had. His mind was bitter with memories. He remembered the little spread he and Chuck had owned; how they'd been ambitious and had borrowed money to expand.

That loan had marked the beginning of their trouble with Morgan and Adams. Although both Vic and Chuck should have guessed it, neither one suspected that Morgan and Adams had bought their note from the bank.

Well, even then, it would have been all right if Vic and Chuck hadn't stayed in town that day for a few drinks. The money to pay the note was in Chuck's pocket when they started home, well after dark. Hidden guns lashed at them from the trail. Chuck died without lifting his Colt and some of the slugs slammed into Vic, numbing him. He remembered vaguely, hanging onto the saddle horn as his mount galloped off.

He'd come to in a trapper's cabin, high in the mountains, with old Lafe Jergens, the trapper, feeding him medicine sent by Martha Dane.

"From now on, Johnson, you play it our way. We've got the whole town by the tail and you can't buck us. You made just one mistake—and that was thinkin' a dead man can't die again!"

start trouble, think again," Ira Connaly snapped. "There's been peace in Sage Forks since Chick Dane was killed and you disappeared."

"Which means in plain language," Vic said drily, "that Slade Morgan and Ching Adams have got this town by the tail." He glanced toward the Drover Saloon, where the tall man had gone. "I reckon Al Po is still on their payroll—paid to use his guns."

"There ain't a shred of evidence that any of them three had anything to do with Chuck Dane's death," the lawman said doggedly. "And if you try to start anything—"

But Vic wasn't listening. Up the street he saw a man leave the saloon and ride out of town. That would be someone Al Po had sent to tell Morgan and Adams that Vic was in town. Things were already moving.

Two months ago Sheriff Connaly had been on the verge of running Adams and Morgan out of the county. They were trouble makers and power-mad. But a lot of things can happen in two months and a killer-gun like Al Po wore can win a lot of arguments. Now the sheriff was singing a different tune. Vic was disappointed. He'd counted on Connaly's help.

Vic walked down the street toward Doc Little's neat cottage. He was conscious of the impact of dozens of eyes as he strode along.

"You was laying just a few feet from one of my kyotee traps," Lafe said. "Got word to that Dane gal, and she sent some medicine up."

Chuck had looked around for his gun.

"Ain't no use going back, son," Lafe said. "Them two skunks didn't waste no time foreclosing on your property. That gal of yours said to let her know when you was well enough. She'd come up and the two of you'd hit the trail. There ain't nothing left in Sage Forks for either one of you."

Lafe had been wrong. Vic's hand brushed the butt of the Colt swinging at his hip. There was something left in town for him. There was vengeance first, then maybe. . . .

MARTHA DANE had been keeping house for Doc Little, and now Vic saw her as he neared the little cottage.

"Vic!" There was surprise and fear in her voice as he came on the porch. "Didn't—didn't Lafe tell you?"

"Sure, but you didn't think I would run away, did you? While Morgan and Adams are still alive, and Al Po?"

"Vic," warned Martha, "a lot has happened in the two months you've been gone. Adams and Morgan—well, they run Sage Forks now. Remember there were two or three other small

ranchers that tried to buck them. After you were hurt, one of them was killed and the rest sold out to the Combine."

Vic nodded grimly. "I figured it all out while I was laying in bed. Adams and Morgan had this planned since they came to Sage Forks five years ago. They waited their time; then struck when the sign was right."

"You'll be fighting a whole army of gunmen. They've thrown their ranches together and call it the Combine. Vic, we've got to go. You wouldn't have a chance!"

Vic shook his head. "Somebody's got to fight them—if Sage Forks is ever to be a decent place to live in again." He patted her arm. "And don't worry. Once the fight starts, there'll be plenty to side with me."

Martha was fighting back the tears. "There won't be, Vic. The Combine has the town and the people bluffed! Even Sheriff Connaly is afraid to buck them. Vic, I lost Chuck—I can't stand to lose you, too!"

But he was moving toward the door. Two riders had swung into the main street. It wasn't hard to recognize the fat body of Slade Morgan slopping over in the saddle, nor the erect, military bearing of Ching Adams. Al Po strolled out to meet them, and they stood in a little knot, talking.

Vic heard the girl's choked sob behind him

as he stepped through the door. The three men turned their heads and stared toward him, then strolled into the Drover Saloon. Vic started walking. He wished he could go back and comfort Martha but he knew he couldn't stop now.

The street ahead of him cleared as if a giant gust of wind had swept it clean. He was not conscious of walking, only that the saloon was getting ever closer. The reassuring bump of the Colt on his thigh was like soothing salve on a raw wound. That gun was going to wipe out the blot the Combine had put on his life!

With curious detachment, he wondered how it would come. It would undoubtedly fall into the same old pattern that these things always fell into. Al Po would already have his orders. It would be he that would start things rolling.

A cold knot gathered in Vic's stomach, but he fought his nervousness. Al Po was fast—damn fast! But Al Po didn't have a partner's death to avenge!

The saloon was only a few yards away now. Vic could see the windows and there was no one standing near them. His boots clumped loudly on the board sidewalk, his stride steady and sure.

Behind him a door slammed. He heard Sheriff Connaly yell something; then heard the lawman running to catch up. Vic smiled

Why Man's Prayers Did Not Stop Hitler

Millions of people daily practice meditation, prayer, new thought and other spiritual exercises. For many years people of good will have been praying for the overthrow of Hitler, Hirohito and what they stand for. Why has the answer been so long delayed? Why do so many other prayers remain unanswered? Why does calamity often befall us in spite of our prayers?

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As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this notice a 9,000-word treatise. It is free. For your free copy, send your name and address to the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. H-197, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Write promptly.



thinly. He wondered if it had been planned for Connaly to be just a little too late for the shooting.

With his left hand, he flung open one of the swinging doors; then quickly shouldered the other aside and stepped in. Connaly's footsteps were pounding close now. Vic's right arm was loose, but it was the laxness that spells lightning speed.

"Well, well, Vic Johnson! Glad to see you, son!"

Vic let his breath out slowly, and he knew he was gaping like a fish out of water.

"Come in—have a drink!" Slade Morgan's fat hands held up a bottle and a glass. His round, moon face was wreathed in smiles. Ching Adams, right beside Morgan, had a fixed grin on his face. Al Po's lank form leaned against the bar. His cold face looked as friendly as was possible.

"We heard you were dead, son, and naturally we are darn glad to see you alive and kicking." The words rolled from Morgan's oily tongue. "But you look pale sorta—a drink's just what you need to buck you up."

Sheriff Connaly slammed through the batwings, bumping and jostling Vic before he could stop.

"I don't drink with skunks!" Vic declared flatly.

"Vic!" Connaly warned, "remember what I told—"

"Now, now," Morgan soothed, "don't get upset, sheriff. Vic, here, has gone through a terrible experience—seeing his best friend killed from ambush, and losing his ranch like he did. Naturally, he's bitter and has jumped to the conclusion that since Adams and I held the mortgage on his place, we had a hand in that brutal business. That right, Vic?"

"Yeah," Vic drawled slowly. "Now draw! Damn you—"

"Vic!" Connaly's voice was tinged with fear.

Morgan laughed, a little shaky. Ching Adams joined in and it sounded to Vic like the cackle of buzzards over a cow carcass.

"Nothing to get nervous over, Sheriff," Morgan said; then turned to Vic. "I want to remove all doubt from your mind, Vic. If it's your wish, Johnson, Adams and I will surrender to the law right now and stand trial for the murder of your partner! Say the word—do we, or don't we?"

Vic was too amazed and angry to speak. He just shook his head. He'd come into the Drover expecting a shoot-out—and Slade Morgan had beaten him with his slick tongue. Slade would also make him look like a fool if he stood trial for Chuck's death, for there was nothing definite, no clue of any kind, to link Morgan with the killing.

He turned to go, but Ching Adams stepped

over and took his arm. Ching was laughing now but Vic sensed that Ching was laughing at him.

He felt a glass being shoved into his hand, and fought down a mad desire to hurl the raw whiskey into Slade Morgan's fat, beaming face.

"Drink 'er down, Vic," Slade boomed. "And I want you to know that we're your friends. If there's any way I can help you get back on your feet or get started again, just let me know. Barkeep! Set up the house."

IT SEEMED to Vic that half the town was there. Slade's invitation caused a general hubbub, and Vic and Slade were crowded close together. Slade leaned close. The hard glitter of the real Slade was in his eyes now and his voice rasped like a file.

"We're not fools enough to play your game—with guns, Johnson," he snapped. "From now on, you play it *our* way. We've got what we want—the whole county in the palm of our hand—and we won't take a chance on losing it by letting you start a range war."

"You think you've got the town bluffed, huh?" Vic shot out.

"Don't think, know it!" Slade snapped. "And you'll like it or leave. You can't buck us," he grinned, "because we won't buck!"

Vic got out as soon as he could. He walked to the edge of the town and sat down under a cottonwood. He tried to think, but the thought of how Morgan had tricked him drove all other thoughts away. Morgan's plan was so simple. He refused to fight and that was all there was to it. Vic would have to start the fight and Morgan, in his new position of power, could hide behind the law. Furthermore, in any battle with the law, Morgan's fight was already half won for he had openly declared his willingness to stand trial for Chuck's death.

A flicker of a smile crossed Vic's face. He got to his feet, and gave his gunbelt a hitch. The Combine had the town bluffed; Morgan had bluffed Vic out of a gunfight. Maybe two could play at this game of bluff!

Darkness had come while he'd sat under the tree. A pale moon bathed Sage Forks with a silvery glow as he headed for the yellow splashes of light that spilled from the Drover windows. He had no trouble easing into the saloon unnoticed. Gaiety was at its height tonight, and the Combine was paying for the drinks.

Vic saw Al Po over in a far corner, watching a pool game, and threaded his way toward him. The killer was cold sober, and his black eyes narrowed as he saw Vic.

"Smart boss you work for," Vic grinned. "A man less smart would have fought it out, and then had the whole country against him. As it is, the town's all for him. I'd probably

HOT LEAD SHOWDOWN

get myself lynched if I tried to start anything.” A dry chuckle broke from Po. “You learn fast.”

“I reckon, though,” Vic drawled slowly, “that I’m slated to get a bullet in the back like Chuck did—some dark night, huh?”

Al Po’s breath hissed in sharply. His black eyes turned cold, and he dropped into a crouch, one long-fingered hand hovering near his gun butt. The grin remained on Vic’s face, but his body was tense. Then Po relaxed; chuckled.

“It won’t work, Johnson,” he said drily. “No fighting. Boss’s orders.”

“It was worth a try,” Vic said. He picked up a bottle, held it to his lips a long time, but only a drop or two passed his lips.

“I know when I’m licked—” he paused—“but me and Chuck had talked over a way to make money, if we ever needed any in a hurry.” He took another drink, then went on. “Did y’ ever think how much money there would be collecting bounty on wanted outlaws?”

Al Po’s face remained impassive, but Vic noticed he threw a half smoked cigarette away, and then immediately started rolling another.

“Figure it out for yourself,” Vic went on. “An outlaw rides into town and keeps out of trouble. Maybe a thousand miles away, in another state, there’s a reward for him. But if he keeps nice and quiet, it’s an even chance the local sheriff won’t bother to check his reward dodgers.” Vic took another drink. “Did you ever think about that?”

“No,” Po snapped, “and I ain’t starting now.”

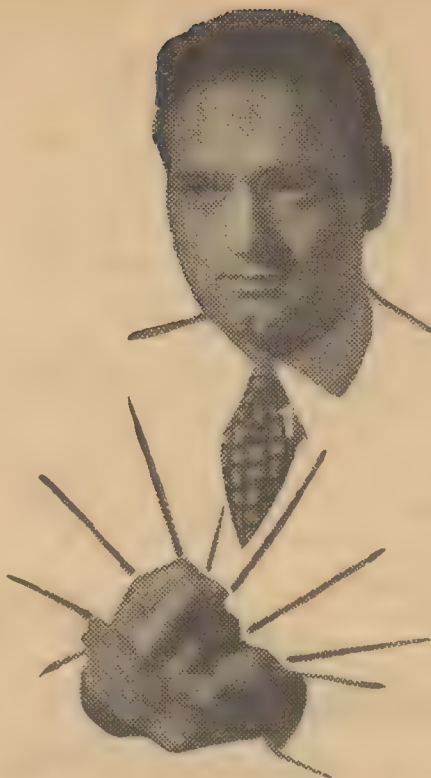
“S’ truth,” Vic muttered thickly. “Just like a lot of money laying around waiting to be picked up.”

“It wouldn’t be as easy as that,” Po growled, shifting uneasily.

“Don’t see why not,” Vic said, with the easy confidence of a man who’s beginning to feel his liquor. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Morgan and Adams were staring suspiciously in that direction.

It wouldn’t do to overplay his hand, now, he thought, so he moved away from Al Po. Standing behind a card table, however, he kept a wary eye on the tall killer. Po was plainly nervous, and kept shooting glances at Vic.

IT WAS working so far. Po was a professional killer, and it was Vic’s guess that not one out of a dozen men like Po had a clear backtrail. Somewhere, just like he’d said, there was a reward out for them. He made a show of lifting his whiskey bottle again, just as Slade Morgan moved across the saloon beside Po.



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

The two talked in low tones for a few minutes. Vic would have given a month's pay to have overheard, but it was plain that Al Po was nettled and worried. Slade Morgan, however, spoke sharply to him, and the killer nodded curtly. When Morgan turned back to the bar, Vic was stumbling around the dance floor with one of the percentage girls. He whirled her over near the gunman.

"Let's all have a li'l old drink," he chuckled. "Look at 'im," he told the girl. "Looks powerful sad to me—needs a drink, huh?"

The percentage girl grabbed Po's arm. For a moment the killer hung back, then shrugged and allowed himself to be dragged off to the bar.

Vic was leading the way, and he got as far away from Adams and Morgan as he could.

"Whiskey!" he ordered loudly. "Not that rotten stuff neither—the best you got!" He winked owlishly at Al Po. "Nothin's too good for us, huh, Al?" He flung an arm over the girl's shoulder.

"Y'see, honey, I'm purty soon gonna be rich—have all the dinero I know what to do with. I'm all ready to collect the first stake and it'll fall right into my hands like a ripe plum!"

He guffawed loudly, and nudged Al Po heavily in the ribs. "It'll sure be a big joke on ol' Al here, when I do."

Po had a drink halfway to his lips. He slammed the glass back to the bar. His thin lips were drawn back over his teeth, his eyelids were narrowed. "What you talking about, you drunken idiot?"

Vic chuckled, as if in enjoyment of some huge joke.

But inside of him, Vic was cold as ice. He wanted to adjust the holster against his leg, where it had become twisted during his dancing, but he didn't dare. It was now or never.

"Why, it's simple, Al," Vic said with drunken innocence.

"I just gotta go turn you in for the reward, and the joke's on you because Morgan's given you orders not to fight with me—"

Al Po flung himself half around. The percentage girl screamed and ducked. The whole world seemed to stop for Vic, as the girl's scream hung in the air. His arm was driving downward with all the speed he possessed; not three feet away was Al Po's face; a cruel face with murder written on it. Al's hand was a blur, there was a faint glint of light on blue gun steel, then guns were crashing a roll of death.

Vic felt something hot and painful as hell rip the lobe of his ear. He was conscious of the roar and buck of his own gun; saw Po

HOT LEAD SHOWDOWN

spin half around as a slug caught him in the shoulder.

A gun crashed behind him, and the lights went out.

The Drover became a bedlam, as men fought to get out.

Curses, hoarse shouts, the thump of boots, and the crashing of glass mingled with the continued roar of shots. And those shots behind Vic still continued!

He cursed and grabbed at Al Po. As he did, he felt the man's body jerk as another slug tore into him. He turned him to one side, then half dragging, half carrying him, Vic got Po to the back door, and out into the alley. Al Po groaned faintly. Vic cursed and picked him up; flung him over his shoulder. Al Po was hit bad but there was no time to handle him gently.

Stumbling and hurrying along as fast as he could, he headed for Doc Little's house.

Halfway there, he saw Doc Little and Martha Dane hurrying toward the Drover. He yelled to them, and lowered Al Po to the sidewalk.

Up the street, the saloon was still erupting a noisy mob, but the shooting had stopped.

"Let me get some light, so I can find my kit," Doc Little said. He carried his little black bag thirty feet or so down the sidewalk, and opened it in the light from a store window.

Vic felt the girl's hand clamp down on his arm with warm pressure.

"Oh, Vic, I was so afraid when I heard the shooting—"

Vic grinned at her. "Don't you worry, honey, everything's going to be all right now."

Doc was cursing and fumbling in his bag. Vic hurried over to him.

Slade Morgan's voice boomed. "That must be Po stretched out on the sidewalk." He was leading the crowd down the street. Vic went back to where Martha was bent over the killer.

"He's dead, Vic," she said.

"Did he say anything?"

She shook her head, puzzled. "Not a word. He was too far gone."

Vic stood up wearily. His bluff had worked all right, but it had overworked. Po had been the one weak spot in the Combine's armor, the one man that could pin a murder charge on the Combine, and now he was dead and killed in such a way that the killing was pinned on Vic Johnson!

WITH bitter eyes he watched the oncoming crowd. The sight of Slade Morgan swinging along confidently at the head of the procession filled Vic with impotent rage.

For a fleeting instant he thought of making



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Slade show whether his gun had been fired or not, then shook his head. Slade wore no holster, and whatever gun he had on him, was carried in his pocket and that gun wouldn't be on him now.

"Keep your hand away from your gun, Johnson!" Sheriff Connaly barked.

"Don't be a fool," Vic said wearily. "I shot in self defense. One of the girls will testify to that."

"That's right," Morgan cut in. "I saw it all."

He sighed. "Po was a killer, all right. I'd been thinking of firing him, fearing that something just like this would happen." He turned to Doc Little. "But since he worked for me, I'll do the right thing by him." His eyes narrowed. "Did he—did he have any last words or any last request?"

Doc shrugged. "Martha here was with him when he died."

Vic stepped beside the girl. A wild hope surged through him. He'd bluffed Al Po. Maybe—

"He did have some last words to speak, Morgan. Sheriff, earlier today Morgan offered to stand trial for Chuck's death and robbery. You can arrest him now—on the strength of what Po told Martha Dane just before he died—"

Slade Morgan made a funny jerking movement. Vic had been waiting for it. With his left hand he shoved Martha roughly, then quickly dropped to one knee, his gun streaking upward.

A shadowy figure was darting up the alley where Vic had carried the dying Po. A gun thundered.

Vic fired. A hoarse yell of pain and fear broke from the man in the alley.

"Vic, watch Morgan—"

Martha's shrill cry of warning froze in her throat.

Vic flipped his gun around; its roar mingled with the spiteful crack of the Derringer in Morgan's hand. Vic felt something slice through his thigh; saw Slade Morgan stumbling backward as the slug caught him; then Vic thumbed a second careful shot at Morgan. . . .

Doc was putting the finishing touches on Vic's bandage, and Vic was clumsily trying to apologize to Martha.

"Just don't know what got into me, honey, but I knew Ching Adams must be in that alley and that he'd make a play for you if they figured you knew anything. Then when I got Ching, there was nothing left for Morgan to do but go for his gun."

"Silly! Quit worrying," Martha told him gaily. "It's all over now—and we'll get the ranch back."

ON THE TRAIL

(Continued from page 6)

Into the desert rode Arrington and his detachment. In two days they reached a small lake fed by brackish springs. There were Indian signs all around. They named it Ranger lake and rode onward.

After traversing eighteen miles they came upon four more of the lost lakes. Here, then, was the answer to the Indians' ability to make their raids, and escape back into their home lands.

A February full moon, the time favored by the Indians for their expeditions, was just ahead. So Arrington and his men went into ambush, stayed hidden there for ten days and nights.

And not an Indian showed up!

From the start of their trip the Rangers had been on half rations. By now they were on a starvation diet. Antelopes were plentiful, but ammunition was scarce, and with a battle impending they dared not waste bullets on game.

But the battle did not materialize. No Indians came their way. The moon was on the wane and reluctantly Arrington gave the order to head back toward their temporary camp.

They started. Then a norther came howling down, filling the air with driving snow. Temperatures plunged far below the freezing point.

It would be hard to imagine a more forlorn looking outfit than that little squad of Texas fighting men as they fell in line and took up their march in the face of a raging blizzard. Already they were half-famished, without a single morsel of food. Worse than all, the horses, nearing exhaustion, reeled as they walked.

It took stout courage to make that journey. Not the only sacrifices were those made in battles with Indians and outlaws. Battles with the elements often took greater toll of man and beast.

Arrington inspired his men with his own lofty courage. He knew that some fifty miles to the northeast were a series of caves known as the Yellow Houses. Not far from the caves was the Causey brothers' buffalo camp. Relief would be sure if he could reach those points.

But if he missed them there would be little chance for survival in the storm.

NIGHT came on. Still no relief in sight. The snow by this time was fourteen inches deep. One man's horse gave out. When the rider attempted to dismount he could not move. He was absolutely paralyzed with the cold.

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Fortunately there was one lead horse in the outfit. The stricken man was lashed to the back of this animal and the little band pressed on into the face of the blizzard.

Then suddenly the snow stopped falling. The clouds parted. Through the night shone a lone star, an omen of good luck. That would be as good a guide as any.

Straight toward this star they rode—and within half an hour were inside one of the largest of the Yellow House caves. Here they gathered mesquite bushes and made a fire, which gave them some warmth.

As soon as it was light the next morning the three strongest men in Arrington's detachment set out for the Causey brothers' camp. By noon they were back, leading pack mules loaded with provisions.

Arrington carefully surveyed his exhausted men. Most of them were weak from hunger and exposure. It would be pure murder, he decided, to let them have a full meal.

So he guarded the grub pile himself, dealing out the food a little at a time, over the protests of his men. Gradually he increased the amount. In four days the whole outfit was back in shape and able to make its way back to its home station.

Such incidents were common in Texas back in the seventies and eighties, but an uncommon sight was a Ranger in Yankeeland. But Yankeeland had a glimpse of Texas Ranger justice in 1883 when this same Ranger Captain George Arrington stormed up Beacon Hill in Boston, Mass., to lay siege to the State House.

And this was no gaily-bedecked, circus-horse sort of a Ranger, just a quick-shooting, straight-actioned cowboy whose armament had been added to the law by virtue of the warrant of the Governor of Texas. Arrington's only compromise with the East was in his attire. He wore a stiff-bosomed white shirt with hard collar and little black bow tie.

A cattle firm down in Texas known as Baker & Shields, though everyone knew that these were not the real names of the owners, had shipped sixteen cars of steers to market. Inspectors cut out four cars which they designated as "stolen stock."

Warrants were issued for the arrest of the two men. Shields was quickly located, but Baker, known as "the Deacon," fled the country and headed back for his native Massachusetts.

Captain Arrington was handed a warrant and told to bring Baker back to Texas.

This was new work for a Ranger, but Arrington got aboard an eastbound train and eventually arrived at his destination.

There he ran into plenty of trouble, for

ON THE TRAIL

Baker, it seemed, had ample funds to defend himself, and money then, as now, made many friends.

The Ranger tried for two weeks to get action. No results. Then he decided that he'd have to see the Governor in person.

So one morning back in '83, he buckled on his artillery, climbed up Beacon Hill and finally found himself at the door of Governor Ben Butler's anteroom.

Guards told him that the governor was a busy man, would not see him except by appointment. And that, they told him politely, might take several days.

Arrington said, "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but my business will not wait."

He brushed the guards aside, crossed the anteroom and fairly hurled himself into the executive chamber.

Governor Butler was alone, seated at his desk. At the sight of this gun-draped, fiery-eyed denizen of the Wild Southwest, Butler, who himself was never noted for a lack of courage, rose to his feet.

"Get out of my office!" he shouted. "And if you want to see me come in the regular way."

"I'm sorry, governor," Arrington said calmly, as he laid a bundle of papers on the desk. "But I have been in Boston two weeks on a special mission for the governor of Texas. My business cannot wait."

"What do you want?" Butler inquired.

"I want your signature on this paper. Then I want to take Deacon Baker back to Texas!"

Butler's face suddenly beamed. "So you came all the way up here for Deacon Baker, eh? Well, sir, take him and welcome! I never have liked the fellow myself!"

The governor reseated himself and signed the extradition papers. Captain Arrington thanked him, shook hands and set out to get his man.

It was bad news for Deacon Baker. And when he saw who the governor of Texas had sent after him, he became resigned. No one in his right mind would resist a Texas Ranger.

Arrington had his man out of Massachusetts before any restraining measures could be set in motion.

A few days later Baker was looking through the bars of a Texas jail.

* * *

THE sure-enough correct name of this young fellow was Peter Schuyler Van Zant. But the waddies on the Triangle B, in the Texas Big Bend district, called him Prince, or Prince Pete, or just Pete, according to how much breath they had to spare.

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Back in 1888, young Van Zant strayed out to the Triangle B and struck John Hinton, the owner, for a job. And got it.

The Prince, although he hadn't been shaving more than a few years, stood six-feet-four in his socks, had a pair of shoulders that forced him to sort of nudge his way on the oblique through the bunkhouse door.

The round-up over, one evening after the Prince had been on the Triangle B about eight months, Owner John Hinton dished out a bunch of brand new greenbacks and told the boys they could streak it into Alpine.

In less than two hours after they hit the town Prince Pete was trying to jump his cayuse over the lower end of the Sweet William honkatonk. The honkatonk being some twelve feet high in this spot, it was too much of a jump for any kind of a horse. The best the cayuse could do was try.

But the stunt jarred the Prince up a bit and he settled down temporarily. At dusk he rode down to Sam Lannigan's saloon to play with Sam's tame bear, a cinnamon that stood about seven feet high when he reared up.

The Prince and the cinnamon boxed and wrestled for the drinks. After every fall or round, the Prince would hook his arm in the bear's and lead him to the bar. The Prince would take a straight hooker of moonshine. the bear a bucket of water.

In such calm and soothing pastimes Peter Schuyler Van Zant spent most of the night. When daylight peeked over the edge of the world next morning the Prince was pretty well polluted.

He had hoisted himself up onto the roof of Ben Marshall's store and stretched himself out for a nap. The Triangle B boys discovered him there when they turned out for a couple of snifters and breakfast.

An hour later the telegraph operator at the railway station strolled over to Lannigan's where the boys were anchored against the bar.

"Got a wire for a feller named Van Zant," he said to Luke, "an' it sounds damned important to me." He handed the telegram to Luke who read it slowly and with great care.

"Hombres," Luke said, "it sure looks like this present drunk o' urn has got to be laid aside till we get some things straightened out for the Prince." He passed the telegram around for the others to read:

"ARRIVE AT ALPINE WITH RUTH AND HAZEL, ON WAY TO CALIFORNIA, THREE THIS AFTERNOON. MEET TRAIN AND BE PREPARED TO GO WITH US. LOVE

"MOTHER."

ON THE TRAIL

"It appearin'," Luke continued, "that the Prince's maw and like as not his two sisters, are due to slope along this way in somethin' like six hours from now, I recommend that all hands get busy soberin' up the Prince so's these here kin folks o' his'n'll be able to recognize him, and so's he'll be an honor to the old Triangle B."

Four punchers carried the Prince, with the rest trailing along, to the back room of Lannigan's Saloon. There he was stripped and tenderly stretched out on the floor. Then they formed a bucket brigade and passed along cold water from a nearby spring, while Luke sprinkled the Prince, or rather, doused him.

AFTER a dozen buckets the Prince began to wriggle, then sat up. The bartender contributed a bottle of hartshorn, and Luke held it under his nose. The Prince let out a wild yell and stood up. But he was still unsteady on his pins.

As things gradually cleared for him he could see out of both eyes. Then he began to get ruddy about the neckband. This pleased the boys so much that they got a couple of barrel staves and gave him a Mexican massage. You could have heard those slapsticks working half a mile away.

The Prince began to cuss thickly.

"You're a bunch of damned tin-horn rough-necks!" he told them as he sat shivering.

"Son," Luke said in a kindly tone, "there ain't no hombre in this outfit that's got anything ag'in you—you oughta know that. Now, I reckon mebbe you'd better read this telygram. It come this mornin' while you was sleepin' on that store roof. Not wantin' to disturb you, I took the liberty o' readin' it."

The Prince absorbed the contents with one swift glance. There was a lump in his throat and a slight break in his voice as he got to his feet and extended his hand to Luke.

"All right, Luke, and the rest of you fellows. I won't forget this."

The Prince got back into his cowboy outfit, brushed himself off all neat and tidy and half an hour before the limited was due he looked as trig as a new prairie schooner.

The Triangle B men started around the corner of the station to be out of the Prince's way. But the youngster wouldn't have it.

The Triangle B boys got the next best thing to a hug—a warm handshake from Mrs. Van Zant and both of the girls, for the Prince introduced them all around as his partners.

The Prince went on to California with his family and when he returned to the Triangle B several weeks later he brought a new saddle and a pair of fringed chaps for every puncher on the Triangle B.

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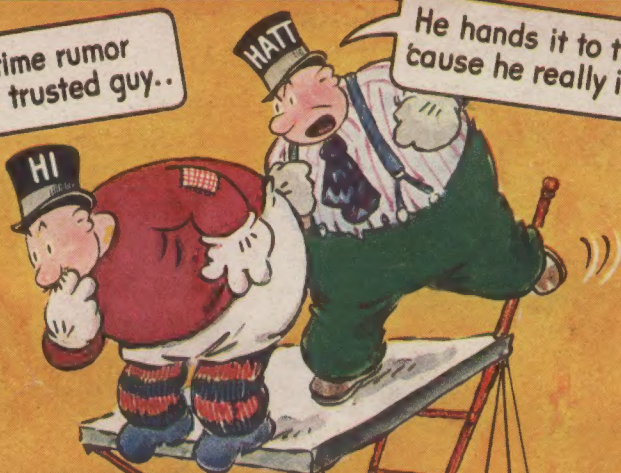
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